

## An Interview with Dr Catherine Halsey

by geophf

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Summary: Lamentation: What greater love than this? That we lay down our lives for our friends? Or, ... that we go on, when they die. What am I going to do, when she's gone? I'm not up for this. Motherhood. It's what I always craved, wasn't it? So why am I terrified at the prospect of its eventuality?

### 1. Dr Catherine Halsey

**\*\*Chapter synopsis: \*\***I'm sitting across from the most powerful, reclusive woman on the planet, and possibly the Universe. I've a rare opportunity to find out what makes the savior of the Human race tick. But I think I know already. I have a secret piece of information that may be ... interesting to her.

\* \* \*

><p>"... Dr. Halsey, thank you for your time ..." I carefully addressed the cold, severe woman sitting across from me.<p>

I had to be careful, for this was a woman so powerful that her personal recorders had been expunged from the chatternet. This meant that all anybody knew about her was what had been recorded from secondhand sources, her height, one-point-seven meters, her skin color, pale, and her hair, which was originally 'blond' but she had very severely corrected me: her hair was 'golden,' she said, not 'blond.'

Everything about her was severe. She wore the grey and starched standard issue uniform of a civil service member of ONI, the 'Office of Naval Intelligence,' but unlike other civil servants, she wore hers unadorned by rank or insignia or reward or recognition. Other civil servants wore their ribbons and badges with pride: 'Look at me,' their uniforms cried out, 'I'm \_important!\_'

But hers was quite the opposite of those of her counterparts. It was plain and unassuming, and it cried out "if it cried out anything

“ was 'please ignore me, nothing to see here, go about your business.' No markings whatsoever on her uniform to identify her, but you'd have to be a fool or an idiot or have had turned off your chatter and hidden under a rock for the last fifteen years not to know who Dr. Catherine Halsey was by sight. Nothing was known about her until, suddenly, she seemed to come out of nowhere to make several singular contributions to science that have proved invaluable to humanity, particularly since humanity's fate hangs in the balance, given that there's a War on.

But besides that, everything about Dr. Catherine Halsey was classified. Her chatter, her background, her place of birth, her age, everything. Even the branch of ONI for which she worked. Even if that branch was the fabled 'Section 0' ... section 'Zero,' the branch that every and all Government sources swore up and down didn't exist and was a silly myth, and, please, sir, go about your business so we can go about ours, that being your safety: these FOIA requests do nothing to help the War Effort.

But I'm not just a journalist and writer, I'm also a scientist myself. Anthropology. I've studied ancient Earth history quite a bit, and the protoHumans and their societies and mores before the new space-faring humanity emerged, 'tweaked' and amplified, connected to everyone and everything through the chatternet.

People were still people, of course, but turn off your chatter? Unthinkable. Ask a protohuman to turn off their breathing. A person wasn't a person so much anymore, an 'individual.' No, we were, each of us, truly connected.

So when we lost the out colonies, and then the inner ones, we, all of us, felt it, each and every disconnection, and, incidentally, each and every death, individually, and on a massive scale. The Covenant came in, glassed a planet, and we lost thousand, hundreds of thousands, even, sometimes, millions of people as the planet burned and then melted into glass, the atmosphere boiling away, wiped clean for Covenant terraforming and reoccupancy.

The Covenant were Hellbent on our destruction, and it has only been through recent breakthroughs, by one of Dr. Halsey's protégés, Dr. Ellen Anders, that we have come to know that this was a religious war for the Covenant: their gods, their 'forerunners' have determined that humanity was a plague, a scourge, to be wiped out, and the Covenant was formed to be the instrument of our destruction.

We have found our answer: there is life out there.

We have met the enemy, but to our horror, we have found that he is not us. This enemy is much more vicious and brutal, and thorough than we ever were, when we were killing each other.

So we have been reduced from a space-faring race, exploring and colonizing our corner of the galaxy, to a whimpering, sniveling, cowering remnant, putting on a brave face, but pushed back to our formerly abandoned dystopia of our home planet, and just resignedly waiting for the Covenant to find the last of us,

... and wipe us out.

That's what most of us were doing. Most of humanity, living in

squalor on this grey, squalid used up planet Earth, begging in the overcrowded streets for food, drinking out of polluted puddles, starving, crying, dying, waiting to be glassed.

Or there were the lucky few of us who met the standards, were issued a battle rifle, and shipped off-planet to die, eviscerated by an Elite's energy sword, or feel the burn from a bolt of overcharged plasma, or explode in a pink mist from Covenant crystalline needles, coughing up your own blood.

And then there were the very, very few soldiers who met the criteria and volunteered for the Spartan I program.

And then there was one of Dr. Halsey's projects: the Spartan II initiative.

I looked at the two towering hunks of metal flanking Dr. Halsey. Guarding her? Protecting her? I felt the two giants behind me, their hands cocooning their assault rifles that each weighed, with ammunition, almost as much as I did.

The Spartan II MJOLNIR-class armor itself weighed five-hundred pounds.

A Spartan II in their arm weighted over one-thousand pounds.

I wondered what a Spartan II weighed just out of the shower?

I would always wonder that. Spartan IIs were so classified, they were just known by number Spartan-010, Spartan-023, Spartan-058 (sniper), Spartan-087 ... and, of course, the famed Spartan-117 who single-handedly took out a heretofore-thought indestructible Covenant cruiser.

He (or she, Spartan II gender was classified) would be celebrated wherever he (or she) went.

If we knew which Spartan II 117 was: they all looked and acted exactly the same, sometimes only a slight variation in weapon selection gave them away. For example, it was 'known' that Spartan-058 was such a good sniper that ... and this was pretty certain: ... 'she' was said to have sniped an Elite out of airborne and evading 'banshee'-class Covenant vehicle in pitch blackness from over six thousand meters.

Of course, that was probably just mythologization: the universal record for sniper distance was two confirmed kills at twenty-five hundred meters, but those were from a set emplacement against stationary targets.

So the stories about Spartan-058's sniping abilities were probably just myth. Like many of the stories surrounding the Spartan IIs: stories to give dying humanity a little bit of hope, one last 'huzzah' as we met our inevitable end.

And our end was inevitable, no matter what propaganda the UNSC broadcast. The Covenant were relentless, and we were ... losing this war, bit by bit, ship by ship, planet by glassed planet. We had inferior tech and with each battle, we grew weaker, and the Covenant grew stronger. It seems recently even a new race of beings had joined

the Covenant, new leaders alongside the imperial Elites.

Brutes. Vicious, bloodthirsty â€” and it turns out: carnivorous â€” gigantic gorilla-like Brutes.

We've seen our marines eviscerated by Elite swords, that little bit of loveliness was broadcast by the Covenant: one second, nothing; the next, a three meter tall lizard decloaks and stabs a squad leader through the back, shrugging off every round fired by her squad mates at it with its shield tech.

But then they showed us images of the Brutes cleaning up the battlefield ... after. Eating marines, still alive, screaming, watching helplessly as the brutes tear into their guts and gnaw into their limbs. Unlucky bastards. Our boys, our ... girls, begging, screaming, dying.

God.

The lucky ones were being roasted on spits, already having died in battle.

The Brutes need their post-battle celebratory feasts, don't they?

Covenant scum.

I felt my hands shake. My detached journalistic indifference was being affected by my personal feelings. And we can't have that.

Not in front of Dr. Catherine Halsey.

Because there's been stories about her. About people who had 'scientific differences' or 'personal issues' with her. There've been stories about what happened to those people. People like Dr. Ellen Anders, for example, a brilliant Xenobiologist and -linguist, a war hero.

She and Dr. Halsey worked together in ONI for a while and then ... Dr. Anders was suddenly transferred to a tour of duty aboard the \_UNSC Spirit of Fire,\_ and that's the last anyone's heard of that ship, ... or of Dr. Ellen Anders.

You don't cross Dr. Halsey.

She gazed at me coldly, and responded: "Time is a precious thing."

And I could see in her eyes that she was wondering what goon gave me permission to trespass on her valuable time for this interview, when she could be doing something better and more productive for the War Effort, like her research.

Her very classified research.

"Yes, well, ..." I ventured weakly. "It's just that I had some things to clear up about the dig site our team investigated in the forests of North West old Amirka, and ..."

"That's old news," she interrupted dismissively. "The dig was on a

speculation that there may have been an artifact or artifacts there, based on some classified signature anomalies consistent with artifacts found on other planets. None were found, however, so the case closed."

She began to rise, indicating this interview, this very brief but obviously wasting-her-time interview, was at a close, too.

"But we did find artifacts, Dr. Halsey," I put in quickly.

She was half-in, half-out of her chair, looking at me impatiently.

"An outline of a family dwelling in the terrain," I said. "Carbon dating pegs it to about five hundred years? Or perhaps a bit older?"

She stood, again disinterested. "Perhaps. A cabin in the woods from old Earth is of no consequence. There was also evidence of the remnant of the town of Belle Fourche, South Dakota before the Great Diaspora to the Core Worlds in the late twenty-fourth century. Good day."

She turned to leave.

"Our team found traces of human remains, too." I said.

"... which were unidentified. You're not telling me anything I don't know."

Her back was like the rest of her, hard, sharp, angular, dismissive as the glass-steel door slid open to allow her exit.

"I identified them."

That stopped her.

The Spartan IIs didn't move. They just stared, facelessly, at me.

Dr. Catherine Halsey didn't move, but her back now gave the air not of dismissal, but ...

Caution.

"A one Isabella Marie Swan," I said carefully, "daughter of Charles Swan, sheriff of some town in old Montana, which records indicate was more than one hundred-sixty kilometers from the dig site."

Dr. Halsey turned back, regarding me critically, coldly.

"With no evidence of their primitive conveyance in the vicinity. They did have auto-reciprocating motor vehicles by then, didn't they, Dr. Halsey? So why didn't she use one of those?"

There was silence from her. An angry, controlled silence.

"And the thing is, the girl had been reported missing and presumed dead? There were some local media attention at the time, but she was never found? And I was wondering, Dr. Halsey, how a girl on old Earth

in the wilderness could go missing and wander so far to end up safely in a cabin in the middle of the woods and then die at the very site where we were sent to investigate the possibility of finding a Covenant artifact."

"Forerunner artifact," Dr. Halsey corrected coldly. "I have no interest in Covenant artifacts. I leave that to other scientists."

... \_like the missing-in-action Dr. Anders, \_I thought, unsettled.

"Yes," I quipped, "The Covenant's 'gods,' right?"

And I snickered, showing her I was, like her, a sophisticated person, and in-the-know, not like the vicious religious rabble that the Covenant, and some hangers-on from the outer colonies, like Coral, believe in 'God' and having silly religious superstitions.

We were in an enlightened age now. Religion died, for all intents and purposes, in the twenty-first century, after genetic tweaking had replaced the need for 'God' by perfecting and stylizing Man. Just as philosophy at the time said it would.

And people thought at the time Eugenics were a bad thing. Silly, stupid protohumans!

My play at camaraderie fell flat, however.

Dr. Halsey regarded me coldly, and my laughter died in my throat. She sat back down, appraising me.

"You're very thorough," she said, distaste evident on her face.

"Good science is thorough science," I intoned.

But instantly regretted it. Dr. Halsey \_gave\_ lectures. She apparently didn't like getting lectured \_to.\_

"But these details weren't in the report you filed," she said.

"I found them out after researching after the dig," I said. "They weren't in yours, either." I added carefully.

She shrugged. "They were incidental facts, and therefor unnecessary for my report."

"Perhaps for locating a Cov-..." I began then corrected myself at her frown, "I mean, a Forerunner artifact, but consider their significant historical impact!"

"And that's why you've taken my time today? To ask about details of an abandoned dig site?"

Dr. Halsey shook her head at my frivolousness.

"Dr. Halsey," I said, feeling the anger burn inside. "There is more to science than utility and pragmatics. You were the first scientist with boots on the ground at that site, and you saw the site pristine.

Surely you saw things there that would be useful to other branches of science than the \_ONI\_ branch of science." I spat out that last phrase angrily. We scientists hate the military for their one-cell-per-brain thinking, derailing so many viable research projects with their Neanderthal mentalities, driving over evidence in their warthogs and digging latrines on burial grounds. "Think of the contributions that could be made to anthropology! I mean, here was a member of a primitive culture probably doing mundane and domestic tasks that would be invaluable in unlocking what their society was like!"

"Ah, yes," she said with a wave and a dismissive grin, "your passion. It was after the dig you started writing historical fiction about this character you invented, wasn't it?"

"How do you know about that?" I asked surprised.

She sniffed. "We're ONI; we know everything. Your alias is recorded in your dossier which I read before granting the interview, doctor ... or should I just call you geophf?"

"Ah," I said at a loss. I thought my private life was safely separated from my public one. But, in the chatternet, there's really no privacy, or there's the new privacy: which is that there is so much related information that nobody has either the time or the inclination to follow the linkages.

Particularly not boring, standard and grey GIs â€" "Government Issues" â€" like Dr. Catherine Halsey. She's much too busy, and too important, to care that I write, and about what I write for my own pleasure ... if it hasn't been peer-reviewed by other scientists, I didn't think she'd sully her hands to care.

"Did you also read my story? Or did you just note that I wrote a story?" I asked shyly.

She regarded me levelly. "\_Stories.\_ Yes, I read them."

"Oh," I said. I had one story that had gathered some interest over the 'net: it being 'historical' and 'human interest' harkened back to 'better times,' and people needed that these days. But the main story, the focus of my recent work, \_My Sister Rosalie\_, was the one that drew the readership, the other ones were not so much of a draw.

"What did you think of them?" I asked.

She regarded me and waved dismissively. "I suppose I could see why you have a following, but you romanticize the past, and that is not at all helpful for people to be reminiscing over the 'good old days' that never were. No, people, today, need to be actively concerned with what we need to do now so we will have a tomorrow we can collectively wake up to."

"I've never seen a pragmatist express optimism," I observed.

"It's not optimism," she corrected, "It's confidence."

She reached out and patted the Spartan II to her left on the arm: "These Spartans are very much like my own children, they are

humanity's next step and only hope, and they will roll over the Covenant and destroy them, separating them like chaff from wheat to be cut off and burned."

My lips twitched upward. "Okay, one Spartan, one exemplar Spartan did take out a Covenant cruiser, perhaps, I'll grant you, but the Covenant armada is massive! Worlds-large, and we're reduced to nothing!"

"Nothing," she said, "and my Spartans."

She glowed with pride, then added: "... and we're just getting started. Before this decade is through, my Spartans will knock the wind out of the Covenant sails and push them back as we push out from this little corner of the Universe."

I noticed the emphasis she placed on \_'my\_ Spartans.'

"Isn't that right, Joseph?" she asked the Spartan to her left.

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am!" the Spartan replied devotedly.

I regarded the two-and-a-half meter war machine. His voice was distorted by his helmet's speaker's amplification, but it was much more youthful and enthusiastic than I had imagined it would have been for a terrifying warrior, defending humanity against the alien assault. The image his voice gave was more of that of a puppy-dog, eager to please.

I looked him over skeptically, then asked: "And these Spartans are going to be the new humanity that will go out and repopulate our worlds?"

I tried not to sound sarcastic. After a certain amount of tweaking, the body became no longer human, but a half-thing.

These Spartans had been tweaked much, \_much\_ more than a 'certain amount.'

Dr. Halsey smiled sadly. "No," she said, "of course not. The Spartan IIs are mules, they will not be the next generation, but they will make sure that we do have a next gen-..."

The door behind her slid open and in rushed a young girl, stumbled in, more like, than 'rushed.' She had long flowing chocolate-brown hair that matched her sad, soulful eyes. She was a real looker. Quite the opposite of Dr. Halsey. Dr. Halsey was all hard angles and hard looks, every word and act of hers was deliberate, but this slim girl was all softness and hesitancy. Dr. Halsey was competent and ruthless. But this girl looked good and kind.

And she also the tired look of a young mother overwhelmed by the needs of a squirming bundle in her arms.

"Rosalie," she said, "are you done yet? Can you please, please, please help me with Miranda, she's been really, really fussy and ... Oh!"

She looked at me, shocked.



"Who are you?" she asked tentatively, then she looked thoughtful, like she was trying to \_talk? to her chatter?\_ Like she was a person who hadn't had the prenatal chatter implant? Was that possible?

It was. There was scarring on around her scalp, mostly hidden by waves of hair, indicating very deep incisions healing after months of recovery.

And I noted her look ... \_proto?\_ She had a hesitant, clumsy air, as if she only used ten percent of her brain capacity to maneuver her body, and her speech, New Standard, sounded non-native.

I set my chatter to work.

"You're not on my chatter-net," she stated.

She said 'chatter' and then 'net' as if they were two words.

I queried mine for her handle.

My chatter came back: \_id: unknown.\_

Not: 'id: classified' like for Dr. Halsey, or the Spartans, who came up: 'id: Spartan-122' for the one she called 'Joseph.'

But 'id: unknown.'

And I attempted to contact her chatter. And I couldn't. Just like for Dr. Halsey.

The \_Spartans\_ were on chatternet ... and on the classified UNSC battlenet; how else would they bravely wade into the midst of battle and direct civvies to safety if they weren't on chatternet?

But Dr. Halsey wasn't. You wanted to talk to her, you \_talk\_ to her.

And this girl \_definitely\_ wasn't. She had chatter, obviously, but wasn't on chatternet.

How could this be?

Then I saw other tells. Her unformed look. Her, ... well, for lack of a better word, her innocence. Like she were new to this world. To this life. ... to her body.

\_Flash clone?\_ I thought to myself, but then immediately my mind rebelled: \_Impossible!\_

Flash clones were so fucking illegal, just thinking about them landed you in an incinerator, and besides, the one that was discovered was so stupid-new in its body, it barely knew how to breathe, confined to a wheelchair while it lived its very short life of two weeks before complete organ failure killed it. It was supposed to be a surreptitious replacement for some child went in for a surgical procedure and came out a flash clone. The doctor was found out of have botched the operation, killing the child in the process, so he replaced the corpse with a flash clone and blamed the anesthesiologist. That trial made the chatternews for quite some

time.

A flash clone didn't know how to stand up. It didn't know how to talk. It didn't know how even to move its lips to smile at you, or to blink, or how to do basically anything!

But how could she be 'id: unknown'? Every birth was registered. Hell, every conception was sequenced and registered, and the chatter implanted in the third term. You were known before you were born, and you knew everybody, yourself, from your mother's womb.

How could this girl grow to her teens before she had chatter installed if she weren't snuck in via flash cloning? But how could she be standing talking to me and Rosa-...

To whom?

She called Dr. Halsey 'Rosalie,' I just realized. That wasn't a common name now. That wasn't a common name in the era of Old Earth.

I looked from Dr. Halsey to this ... person and back again.

"You aren't on the chatternet, either, Miss ...?" I said gently, not wanting to scare this ... person, whatever she was.

Because she was a very scared looking thing now, seeing me, and seeing that I could talk.

She looked between me and the Spartans and Dr. Halsey, turning white with fear, not knowing what to do.

"Rho-Rose,..." she stuttered helplessly, "wh-what do I say?"

Dr. Halsey glared at me, pure hate humming across the table, but then her turned, and her gaze softened, and her whole body became less rigid, less angular. She softened when she addressed the girl.

"Sweetie," she said softly, "it's 'Catherine,' remember? Now, take Miranda to the sleep chamber; I'll be with you momentarily, okay?"

I queried my chatter for the baby. It came back right away: 'id: Miranda Keyes, b. 2520, parents, father: Captain Jacob Keyes, UNSC, mother: id: unknown.'

Even as the query returned, it was amended to '... mother: id: classified.'

I looked at the girl holding the baby, the baby's id hovered over her: 'id: Miranda Keyes,' but the id of the young girl remained: 'id: unknown,' it didn't change to the 'id: classified' of the mother of the girl.

In fact, chatter didn't indicate who, in this room, was the mother.

How many 'id: unknown's existed in the world? I had met my first. I'm sure there were more than one 'id: classified's.

But the odd thing was: the baby girl, so unformed, had looks of both Dr. Halsey and the girl ... and, calling up Captain Keye's image, not so much him at all.

Of course, the child could not have two mothers as homosexuality had been outlawed years ago and was now a Capital crime. Humanity had been so reduced that the gene pool itself was in danger, and designer genes were all well and good, but we now needed new and fresh source material, so the primary role of men and women was to survive and to breed, in that order, and homosexuality was an option humanity could no longer afford.

Offenders were summarily executed ... but only after their eggs were harvested. At least some good came out of them.

Only the ultra-rich escaped, because they could afford, first, privacy, living in their own quarters instead of sleeping on the streets like everyone else, and secondly, they could afford the highly-illegal harvesting of stem-cells from their bone marrow so they could fertilize the eggs of their lovers with designer sperm and just be like, 'oh, we're two pregnant girl friends with our husbands fighting the war on the front-lines! Don't mind us!' ... and when the time for registry came, they could afford to pay off the local clerk for the falsification of records of parentage.

'John Quincy Doe' was a very popular father among the ultra-rich.

They could avoid authority for a while, but let's see if they had enough money to buy their way out of the next, and the last, Covenant glassing.

Homosexuality was not tolerated in this new age, it's just a sad, practical reality of this day and age. Earlier centuries could afford those luxuries, we, now, on the brink of extinction, couldn't.

"I-I-... don't wanna go back there," the girl stammered. "Cortana's there."

Dr. Halsey regarded the girl impatiently, trying to get her away from this curious third-party.

I queried 'Cortana.'

\_id: Cortana, Military asset, clas-...\_

The chatstream suddenly broke off, mid-feed, then:

\_ geophf, you can stop prying anytime you'd like. Just a friendly word of advice. You seem like a nice, bright boy, and would be missed, if you ended up missing.\_

Now, that was unsettling.

That was the first time my chatter talked back to me. They were information amplifiers only, not serving any role of advisement.

Can't say as I liked the tone of the advice, either.

"Baby," Dr. Halsey explained patiently. "Cortana's everywhere, and she'll take care of you, ..."

I thought I heard Dr. Halsey whisper something like: "she loves you, just like I do, ..."

She continued. "and ..."

The girl interrupted, huffing angrily: "She took care of me, all right!" then she hefted the baby significantly, who fussed some more, being taken away from the warmth and comfort of the girl's chest.

Dr. Halsey sighed and turned to the Spartan.

"Joseph, would you accompany Lizzie and make sure she's okay until I get back there?"

But it wasn't Spartan-122 that responded.

"I'll go."

It was a female voice, young, strong, sure, that responded to Dr. Halsey's right.

Dr. Halsey turned her head to that Spartan, appraising her. "Thank you, Kelly, ..." she said hesitantly.

The Spartan broke ranks and thundered out of the room with the slightly relieved young girl, the ground shaking with each footfall of her metallic boots.

"Don't get any ideas!" Dr. Halsey called after them, sounding slightly worried.

The young girl looked back in confusion, but the Spartan didn't. She blew out an angry sigh, "Catherine, we all know who she belongs to, okay? Just chill the fuck out!"

"Language!" Dr. Halsey shouted.

The glass door closed and then went opaque, but not before I saw the Spartan pull off her helmet and a cascade of chestnut brown hair fall to her armored shoulders.

I didn't see the Spartan's face.

I didn't query chatter. I wasn't interested in more baleful warnings.

Dr. Halsey turned back to me, and regarded me coolly.

She seemed to come to a decision.

"Well," she said brightly, "back to work; duty calls, and all that!"

She stood briskly.

"'Rosalie'?" I asked.

Did she think I was a fool, or deaf, or both?

"Yes," Dr. Halsey waved that away. "Lizzie's read your story, too, and was quite taken with it, and, well, as you saw, she's not all quite there. She was dying on the street in front of my apartment, and I took her in. It turns out she had severely incapacitating mental disabilities, so I took it upon myself to enhance and repair parts of her cerebral cortex that had been damaged with cybernetic implants. The operations ... mostly worked."

Dr. Halsey shrugged, but looked at me steadily.

Her story was so full of holes I was forced to believe she thought me an idiot.

Mental disabilities? Those were detected pre-birth and the fetuses dealt with. And 'rescuing someone off the street' in front of her apartment, which someone of the hundreds, and which security guard didn't instantly vaporize the girl for entering a restricted area living compound.

Earth took back its wanderers, but not with welcoming arms. If you were poor, you stayed out of the way of the superrich like Dr. Halsey, or the just plain rich, like me. You stayed away, because if you took just one step toward us, there'd be like seven security force members with weapons drawn. The second step forward was a death sentence.

It was actually the preferred way of suicide these days, for the poor.

"So, she gave me the name 'Rosalie,' ... transference, you know?" Dr. Halsey continued, "substituting the rescue from her own plight by me to a girl's rescuing vampire-angel-whatever you write in your drivel, excuse me, I meant to say in your stories that many find compelling, including my Lizzie."

"'Your Lizzie'?" I said incredulously.

"Well, I had to call her something!" Dr. Halsey snapped impatiently.

"And her chatter busted during these ... 'enhancement' operations?" I pursued.

"Just so," she said, then: "Well, goodbye ... \_ geophf." \_ She said the last bit sarcastically, the sneer of a hard technology scientist dismissing a soft science 'writerly' type, like myself, then she smoothly, perfectly turned away and whisked out the door.

I was left, sitting there, agape, shocked at the impossibility of the world I wrote about being ... possible? being ... true?

Everything in ONI was just so surreal!

One of the Spartans behind me cleared his throat, and in a very hostile tone commanded, "Excuse me, sir, we need to escort you off the premises now, please."

I looked behind me. The Spartans again looked every inch of the killing machines they were purported to be.

I rose from my seat. Carefully.

"All right." I said.

We left through the glass door behind me.

"Uh," I said after a moment, "I thought the exit was that way."

I suck at directions in buildings, getting so lost, so easily.

"I'm sorry, sir," the Spartan replied. "The conversation you had with Dr. Halsey has just been classified. We're going to have to have to ask you to come with us, please, for a chatter reconfiguration."

I stopped. The Spartans stopped.

"The, uh," I said, "the chatter is embedded in my brain."

The Spartans looked none too bright. I didn't want to confuse them with a word like 'cerebrum.'

"Yes, sir," he said, "but I regret I do have my orders, if you'd come with me this way, please."

"But," I said desperately, "but ..."

The Spartan's hand clamped down on my shoulder, very gently and then I felt everything go black ...

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_id: geophf, disconnected ...
><em>_id: geophf, copied ...
><em>_id: geophf, modified ...
><em>_id: geophf, reinitialized... testing ... verified ...
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><em>_id: geophf, validation: complete.
><em>_id: geophf, reactivation in 5...4...3...2..._
```

... I was walking down Newbury street past the Central Congregational Church with a massive headache wondering why I was going this way ... where was I supposed to be this evening?

I thought hard through the pain. Nothing came to me.

Shit.

I shook my head and went home. I really have to take a day off from work instead of going with with a migraine! It's just so unproductive, and I only feel sick afterward.

## 2. Coda " the Clone

**Coda " the clone:** "How do I know that when you say you love me, that you're really saying you love her? How can you love me, when I don't even know who I am? How can I love you when I know you created me because I'm supposed to love you. I can't help it! How can

I love you like that? So much that it hurts!" And what could I say to her to let her know that she was right, and I love her just as much.

\* \* \*

><p>"Baby?"<p>

Little Lizzie curled up more tightly around our Miranda, whimpering in her sleep as she cuddled her baby girl.

God, I love her so much.

I looked to Kelly.

"Thank you, Kelly," I whispered softly to the Spartan.

Kelly's lips twitched upward. "No prob," she growled with the gruff voice of a warrior.

Her face became thoughtful. "What to do next?" she asked herself. "Kill shit in the sim? Or go for a good, long run?"

She thought for a moment. "Running, I guess." She got up to go.

That's my Kelly, the fastest of the Spartan IIs. She was clocked at 62 kph during her training. I smiled at her with pride.

"As long as it's not running over the fence, Kelly," I cautioned.

Kelly looked back at me, glowering. "Now, why would I do that?" she demanded angrily.

"Because it's been about a week since you've last tried to escape or have killed anyone," I said, "and you've got that look on your face ..." The \_'fuck it all'\_ look on her face.

Kelly shook her head, her expression sour. "You take the fun out of everything, Doc," she grouched.

I smirked. "Why do you say that? Did I say I was going to report you?"

"You're not?" she asked surprised.

"Well, not at first," I smiled privately.

Kelly regarded me suspiciously. "How much of a lead do I have?"

I snickered. "Now, why spoil the fun and tell you that?"

Kelly's face was thoughtful. "A minute? An hour?"

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, Kelly," I sang delightedly.

Kelly smiled. "You're alright, Doc, no matter what High Command says."

She sauntered out easily, her assault rifle slung over her shoulder "that is, if 'sauntering' is a word that could be applied to a half-ton behemoth of a girl" all pleased with herself that she could babysit a frail, little clone holding a little baby in her arms, and manage to kill ... neither of them.

But now she was keen on the thrill of seeing if she could break her record of how far she could get before the Marines spotted her.

"Hey, Joe!" she bellowed. "Wanna go for a jog around the perimeter a few times with me?"

Lizzie started in her sleep from Kelly's shout.

Ooh, I thought ruefully: 'a jog around the perimeter,' so that was her code phrase to indicate an escape attempt. I shook my head: two Spartans breaking ranks? I wonder how many fatalities would happen this time when the Marines tried to neutralize two Spartans working together.

When Spartans fought back, they fought back for real, and they fought back hard.

My Spartans. Children. Blood-thirsty sociopathic murderers to the last of them, not happy until they're in the heat of battle, being fired at, returning fire, and killing, and killing, and killing.

I took my mind off that, however. It was diverting and entertaining, but it wasn't important. What was important was right before me.

I snuggled up to my sweetie. "How are you, baby?" I asked softly.

"Nnuh!" she snapped tiredly.

I smiled. "Hm, that good? Well, super!"

I wrapped my arms around her. She melted into my embrace and sighed.

"I hate it when you're away from me!" she whispered angrily.

That hurt.

I breathed in her delicious scent and sighed it out over her hair.

She sighed me into her, breathing me in, like I breathed in her. We loved each other too much for our own good.

But I wouldn't trade this for anything in the world.

"I do, too," I said regretfully.

We both knew the score, however. One of the devices implanted into what was salvageable from Lizzie's brain was a little, tiny explosive cartridge filled with cyanide. If I didn't give ONI what they wanted, day after day, eight hours a day for five days a week, well, then, the section chief made it very clear that ONI would take away the



only thing I cared about with one, very remote, button press.

My Lizzie.

"Hey," I said, my tone lightening as I held my girls into me. The baby was asleep, but did Lizzie wanna ...

"Hey," Lizzie grouched back.

From her grumpy tone, I revised my thoughts. It sounds like she didn't wanna.

I smiled into her back. "Never mind," I said softly. "Sleep, sweetie."

Lizzie breathed for a few seconds, then she asked irritably from her sleepiness, "Well, what?"

"It was nothing, sweetie," I said. "It was just I had a long day at work, and it's so nice to have you in my arms and the baby asleep, and I was feeling a little ... randy and was wondering if ..."

"Hmmpfh!" Lizzie complained. "I'm wondering if you ever \_don't\_ feel 'a little randy,' Rosalie, ... if 'little' can be used to describe how you feel, you sex-fiend, I swear!"

I said nothing. Instead I just held her in my arms, and was content with just that.

Eventually Lizzie got the 'guilties.' Not that I was intent on inflicting this feeling on her. I really didn't care. If she wanted to fuck, I wanted to fuck, if she didn't want to fuck, I didn't want to fuck. It was as simple as that. She was finite, I was infinite. I could spare all the patience that she needed. I had lost her more than five hundred years ago, I now had her back, and I was going to enjoy just being with her while she was still with me, because some day, all too soon, she'd be gone again, dead again; and this time, there'd be no bringing her back.

Her source genetic material was gone, and I couldn't turn her: not since Cortana had replaced her naturally iron-based blood with a perfluorocarbon synthetic replacement when her cloned marrow gave out about a year ago. The new fluid was infused with her scent, so she still smelled wonderfully, but she was now as inedible to me as human toothpaste was, and the venom would no longer interact with her artificial oxygen-carrying plasma.

It made being around her now much easier, but her daily dialysis was exhausting for her, and, her being a fast-clone, the prospects over the long term looked very, very ...

Well, ... fated ... Certain.

This time, in the next two years, or if I were very, very lucky, in the next possibly three years at most, Lizzie would die from catastrophic organ failure, and that would be it for us.

The certainty of that made treasuring every single moment I had with her now all the more vitally important. I fucked it up, ... \_God, \_I

fucked it up with my ego when she was my little captive, and I was hellbent on a mission to improve her. That worked so well when she died on me. I wasn't going to make that mistake now. She could be herself, and I was \_grateful\_ that she was herself, in all her little quirky and annoying imperfections.

She could annoy the hell out of me now for all I cared, because at least now she was here to annoy me, so I could hold her and love her.

At least I had that now, and, really, that's all I needed.

That's all I ever really needed. Ever. And it took five hundred years of her absence, five hundred years of my terrible loneliness to learn that lesson.

I learned that lesson. You don't have to teach that to me again, okay, God?

Lizzie moaned, faintly, plaintively, \_"Roooooose!"\_

She turned, carefully, onto her back, so as to not to disturb the slumbering baby, but also so she could talk to me in a whisper. "You had a hard day, but I had one, too, okay? Miranda was really needy the whole day, grabby and fussy, and she just really tired me out, okay? I'm like ... \_ugh!\_ I wanna push her away, she's been so clingy! I mean, isn't this what you've always wanted: Mommy and baby and all that? And isn't it supposed to be all, \_awww!\_ and \_how cute!\_ and all this lovey-dovey stuff, and not this tiring, exhausting, frustrating, just, just ..."

She broke off, pausing for a second, looking thoughtfully up into the blackness of the chamber.

"I \_suck\_ at being a Mom!" she whispered vehemently.

I didn't answer.

I chose not to. I didn't want to fight her, and make her more firmly believe she was a bad mother, when she was so obviously such a good mother to our child.

But how could I say that to her, so that she would really hear my words, instead of just using them to convince herself that I was lying when I was saying good things about her? And when I said anything else about anything else in any other way, she took it as me being critical of her, and used my own words to convince herself she was bad or unworthy of ... everything: my love, motherhood, life, anything.

Sometimes the only thing that got through to her was when I held her. She took great comfort from that.

So that's what I did. I held her. And let her talk, and voice her fears and inadequacies, and tried to listen without criticizing.

Lizzie looked over at me, furtively, from the corner of my eye. Glancing, hoping I wouldn't see her glance, and then she sighed.

"So, you wanna ..." she offered shyly.

She just couldn't bring herself to say the words \_sex\_ or \_fuck\_. \_She was just such a demure, modest creature like that.

And I \_liked \_that, her modesty.

I smiled at her. "Yes," I said. "Always."

"Okay," she said slowly, "but ..."

"'But...?'" I asked.

"But gentle, okay, Rose?" she asked, blushing. "The baby, okay, remember? And I'm just not up for being ravished right now, you wild sex-fiend!"

"Okay," I said, smiling, "gently, then."

Lizzie smiled back, shyly, then puckered her lips, as if to tell me, \_you may kiss me now.\_

I chuckled softly, and Lizzie's look became cross as she shushed me with an angry whispered reminder of \_"The baby!"\_

I kissed her lips to shush her shushing.

\_The baby,' indeed!\_ The little thing had the life: all she did was poop, nurse and sleep, and when things didn't go her way, she cried until she got what she wanted.

Actually, that description of how Miranda is reminds me of a little girl, who wasn't such a little girl, actually, whom I held captive in a cabin in the woods more than five hundred years ago.

Lizzie: all she did was poop, sleep, eat and cry, ... and she always got her way, bossing me around with her pouty lips ...

... that is, until one day I came back to the cabin, and she was dead. She was dead before I could know her, she was dead before I could name her.

She was dead before I could know that I would miss her so terribly badly when she was gone.

Well, I got her back, and then, 'thanks' to Cortana and her endless resources and absolute lack of morality (that description reminds me of someone else, too: myself), I not only got her back, but I also got Miranda out of the deal, too: my daughter...

\_Our \_daughter.

Something, too, that I thought I would never, ever have after I was turned.

I guess it's true about Eternity: something impossible today might not be five-hundred years from now, so all I had to do was to wait for my Lizzie to come back, cloned from her source DNA, then, on top of that, to have Miranda from sperm 'donated' (unknowingly) from

Lieutenant Keyes, carrying chromosomes mapped from my genetic imprint.

Simple, right?

Nowadays, it is.

I put my ruminations aside and kissed my Lizzie, softly, gently.

She hummed her pleasure underneath me. I broke the kiss and looked down at her, smiling.

"You like?" I asked.

"Yaaaahhh," she sighed softly. "I like it when you're gentle sometimes."

"'Sometimes'?" I asked teasingly, and gently cupped her breast.

Poor Lizzie hissed in pain.

"Sorry!" we both said at the same time.

Lizzie grimaced. "Sorry," she said again, "they're just so sensitive these days."

"So," I said, "I guess no mommy-time for me now," and smiled understandingly.

I really did like mommy-time, though, both giving and receiving.

"Sorry," she apologized again. "The baby's been just so needy these past few days!" she added, pouting.

"Perhaps she's teething?" I offered.

"Dunno," Lizzie answered, sounding disinterested in her tiredness.

"'Sokay," I averred, "I can put my lips to use elsewhere." And before my ever-curious-and-clueless lover could ask where I'd put my lips, I covered her curious mouth with mine, kissing her gently as I rubbed her belly in slow, tender strokes.

Lizzie hummed in pleasure again.

I always like looking at Lizzie's face after I kiss her, or, surreptitiously, while I am fucking her, making her cum. Her face is so beautiful: so sweet and innocent and helpless as she lets the waves of my passion wash over her. It's really a heartbreaking sight to behold, my baby loving me loving her.

"Thaaas nizzzze," Lizzie purred, eyes still closed as she basked in the pleasure of my tenderness.

I smirked. "I'm glad you like," I said mildly, barely able to contain my pride that I can pleasure her, and that she desires me at all, the monster that I am.

She knows what I am, and she loves me anyway. I don't know, maybe she even loves me because I am what I am.

The little nut.

She always was different. Instead of running in fear of me, just as everyone else does, she embraces me, and wholeheartedly, even.

She, seriously, has to be the most blind, or stupid, being in the galaxy.

God, I love her so.

"Here's something that you'll really like," I offered.

I gently prodded and pushed, turning her body away from mine. She cradled the baby in a spoon, and I cradled her into my arms.

"Jeez, Rose!" she complained softly. "What is it with you and your infatuation with my butt? I swear! Are you in love with me or my butt?"

"Yes," I answered right away and truthfully. "I love you, and I love your butt. I love rubbing it, kissing it, squeezing it, and fucking it, long, hard, and often. Any other questions?"

"Huuuuuhhh..." was all she could manage, being stunned into silence at my answer.

I smirked. "But, actually, I was planning something else entirely."

"Really?" she asked, trying with moderate success to recover her composure.

"Surprise!" I said, "Dr. Catherine Halsey does not always and automatically fuck your butt in a frenzy whenever presented with the opportunity! Can you believe it?"

Lizzie was quiet for a moment. "Yes," she said eventually, "but I'm even more surprised that you use that name. I thought you hated every name other than yours, and would never use anything else."

"I like your name, Lizzie," I said reproachfully.

"You know what I mean," she sighed exasperatedly.

"'Elizabeth Lucia Aurora Hale,'" I said, savoring each syllable. "It's a beautiful name."

Lizzie was quiet, her pulse slowing down to a mellowed, relaxed rate. "So is 'Rosalie Lillian Hale,'" she rejoined. "That's the most beautiful name in the world."

"Thank you," I said.

"Why don't you use that name?" she asked. "Nobody else can hear us here."

\_Except Cortana, \_I thought, \_who reports my every action to High

Command.\_

"I could," I answered eventually, "if when somebody came out into public areas, she used my public name, and not our private one."

"Oh," Lizzie said, and I felt her blush, and saw her skin tint the slightest green from the fluorine in her synthetic blood. "Sorry."

I smiled. "Besides, 'Dr. Catherine Halsey' is a good name, too. Very proper."

"Yeah," Lizzie retorted. "Proper. Formal. Ick."

Her eloquence was always in top form, wasn't it?

"Come on, sweetie," I cajoled, "Try it. Call me 'Catherine.' You'll like it, I'm sure."

\_"No! Ick!" \_Lizzie retorted, ... a little too sharply. The baby started, waking to a half-sleep, and turned, clasp ing her mother, and latched on firmly, suckling at Lizzie's breast.

Lizzie blew out a long, tired sigh, wrapping Miranda in her arms.

"Does she ever quit?" Lizzie whined.

"I've heard-tell they do eventually ..." I offered consolingly.

"Like when?"

Lizzie's voice was complaining and impatient.

"Sometime before their twenty-first birthday, I'm told," I offered lightly.

Lizzie began to sigh, but then her back tightened up. "No, wait," she said, almost angrily. \_"You\_ sure haven't!"

I snickered then blew a light raspberry-kiss on Lizzie's shoulder. "I guess that just goes to show your breasts are irresistible. What can I say?"

"Wonderful." She sounded not in the least mollified at my attempt at lightening her mood.

Oh, well! I suppose I'll have to chalk up another failure for me.

I didn't care. I'd keep trying, and failing, with my Lizzie, as long as she allowed me to continue to try.

Miranda had stopped nursing, being comforted back to sleep. But you know how it goes: the baby stops feeding, but she's still latched, and the slightest movement on the bed by the mother causes renewed suckling.

Lizzie risked it. She broke free, and as the baby reawakened, she held her and hummed to her and rocked her gently in the bed.

It worked this time. Miranda was full and contented, safe in her mother's arms.

And Lizzie says she's not a good mother! I declare!

I wonder how I'll be as Miranda's mother when Lizzie's dead and gone. Will Miranda even remember the sacrifices Lizzie makes every day for her? The kindness and love she showers on her? Will Miranda remember Lizzie's kind face five years hence? ten years? Or will Lizzie just be an image of a woman shrouded in a cloud of forgottenness, someone who Dr. Catherine Halsey tells her was the best thing in her life, the kindest, sweetest mother she could ever have.

And all this, being told her, ... by cold, distant me, not knowing how to love, how to open up any more, after losing Lizzie again.

How would I be with Miranda with Lizzie dead again, this time forever?

I prayed I would be strong enough to go on. But I feared that's all I would be: strong â€" a strong, distant woman known only as "Mother" or "Dr. Halsey," â€" when she has so, so much more right now with Lizzie, and, being in her first year of her life, not even realizing, not even knowing what a blessing she has in a girl not even twenty in a spindly little frame that barely survived birthing her daughter, even with every resource that this lab â€" a genetic research military facility â€" could provide.

Lizzie's back was stiff and sullen, so I gently rested my hands on her shoulders â€" she stiffened further in shock â€" and I rested my hands there until she relaxed again. She was always such a flighty thing. It hurt me that her natural reaction was to shy away from me, but, I suppose it meant she had at least one natural reaction that was as it should be, to flinch away from danger, from me.

But relax she did, so I began gently to kneed her back, massaging away the knots and stiffness there.

She sighed contentedly, then as I continued to work her back, her sigh turned into a moan of pleasure.

"How's that, baby?"

"Lower, lower!" she urged.

So I asked again, in a much deeper, throatier voice, "How's that, baby?"

Lizzie snorted quietly, "You cornball!"

But her snort returned to hums of pleasure as my hands moved to her mid and lower back, and my fingers continued to work their magic on her back, patiently working out the knots of stress she had accumulated throughout the day.

"You like?" I asked.

"Rosalie, you would not believe!" she replied, then added, "You carry around this little bowling ball all day and your back'd be as stiff

is mine!"

"Stiffer, even," I agreed. I didn't add that there was no material in the world as hard as what I am made of.

Lizzie took my teasing seriously, however. "Do you need a back rub?" she asked solicitously.

"No, sweetie," I said, "I'm fine, thank you."

"You sure?" she asked. "It's no problem, really."

She tried to twist around to face me again. My right hand on her right shoulder stayed her as my left hand continued its soothing magic on her back.

"It's okay," I repeated, then added, \_"This\_ is relaxing for me. I like seeing you soft and pliant and luxuriating for a change."

"Mmm, yeah!" she sighed contentedly as my right hand rejoined my left in coaxing her compliance. "It feels really, really good."

"I'm glad you like," I said.

"'M glad you do, too." Her body was completely still, just the breath going into and out of her lungs, just her little heart beating the richly oxygenated synthetic blood through her little veins.

"Afterward you can have your way with me, too, if you'd like," she added quietly, as an afterthought.

It didn't sound like a suggestion from her so much as just the way things would go.

"Yes, I would like that, too." I said.

Despite myself, the venom flooded my mouth, pooling there, and the pheromones were thick in the air. I was on edge â€" "in the mood for love" â€" as some might say, but I wasn't so discreet. I was rutting: I wanted to fuck my girl, and I wanted to fuck her good, long, and hard! ... and if she were in the mood for it, 'good loving,' or a good, hard, old fashioned Rosalie-fuck, then all the better, says I!

Lizzie snorted again, softly. "Rosalie Hale, you are a perv!"

I wanted to say that it was her suggestion in the first place, but I left that be. Let her have it both ways, and why not? She's had a long, hard day, so she could tease me, then scold me for taking the bait.

I liked our little love play; in my entire existence, I never played. Not when I was a human, \_especially not now\_ when I'm a vampire, so in these quiet moments, I savored the time Lizzie could play with me, lightly, and I could play back. It felt like living, it felt like being a normal couple with normal problems.

Normality. It felt wonderful, the easiness of it.



But I didn't let something else slide.

"You mean to say, 'Dr. Halsey,' or, intimately, 'Catherine, you are a perv,' right Lizzie?" I corrected.

She sighed.

"C'mon, sweetie," I prompted, "give it a try, hm?"

"No!" Lizzie spat back rebelliously.

She is such a child, sometimes!

"For me, hm, Lizzie?" I entreated.

I felt her back tightened up against my massaging hands. I kept working, gently, at her back as I let her struggle over her struggle. She was a fighter, my girl, and the person she fought the most "all the time, in fact" was herself. I'd tell her to do something, or to try something to make her life easier "Lizzie, stop trying to knock your way through the wall by hitting it with your head; use the door instead, please!" but she'd be like: "No!"

Before, I'd get angry and frustrated about this. And then she died.

Now that I have her back, I've decided to let more things go. So she made her life hard for herself, so what! It was her life to make hard, and she had a life to make hard. Thank God! It was so, so easy for her when she was lying, lifeless, on that bed in the cabin, day after day after year after century, and all I could do is watch her body disintegrate.

Things weren't hard for her anymore then.

So, now, I'm glad they're hard for her. Please, God, I'd beg, please keep making things hard for her. Please let her struggle through every little thing! Please, God.

So far, God has been answering that prayer. Daily. And with a vengeance, sometimes.

She struggled, now, with my assumed identity. I could understand her struggle. She was always her to me, frustrating, beautiful, loving, kind, blind, weak, strong, ... her. And her name, her new name, meant so much to me, so I could see that she would always see me as me, so Rosalie, and all the time.

My character was ever fixed, the name was just there as a cover story so the people of today could have the pretense that they could relate to the aloof, insane(ly brilliant) scientist that consistently provided miracles to them on demand, never mind the fact that they had done all the discovery themselves. I just simply put together the disparate pieces: I had unlimited time, capacity and mental capacity to do so, where they did not. So my discoveries were all syntheses of work others had already done, or I had uncovered results that others did not have the perspective to see were important in fields outside their areas of research.

Since my 'area of research' was 'everything,' I was able to make

connections, and to obtain results, that no other scientist could possibly match.

This proved invaluable for the military. That, and I could kick their collective asses, and eat them for lunch while doing it.

That got their attention.

But 'Rosalie Lillian Hale' didn't work for them. 'Dr. Catherine Halsey' did, and, at the time, I didn't give a fuck what they called me, as long as they kept their end of the bargain that I could work on bringing my Lizzie back, they could get whatever research they wanted from me. They could call me whatever they wanted. I'm sure they called me 'hardass' and 'bitch' quite regularly. My needs were quite specific and very exacting, for tools, materials, and staff, and if they didn't measure up, their ass was out the door before they could finish reading the pink slip. Fuck them. High Command wanted results, and I got them results, and I didn't care how many people I walked over to get them what they wanted.

And I got my Lizzie. I got her back. After one-thousand, one-hundred thirty-seven failures, the -thirty-eighth one, Lizzie, lived long enough out of the tube to get her onto the operating table in the ICU and on life support to enact various heroic measures to keep her living, even through a serious-risk pregnancy, even unto now.

It was a close-run thing, but that was a hell of a lot better than most of the rest of the clones that came out as protein stew, or came out of the tube okay, but for just a few seconds before all the internal organs exploded turning the insides into a jelled paste.

Or the ones that came out still-born, or brain dead, or ...

God, and this one was the last viable unit from a batch of a four egg batch. The last batch.

Three eggs never even reached cell division, and simply died in stasis. Just this one survived. This last one from the last batch of source material made it all the way to 'term,' survived the rapid growth in the growth chamber, and came out of it, breathing, coughing, screaming, but not quite dying.

She also came with so many mental disabilities that she would've spent the rest of her very short life as a vegetable on life support, if Cortana hadn't intervened, and implanted along with the chatter node, more than several cerebral nerve stimulators and cognitive amplifiers.

Lizzie was as smart and as quick as the tweaked humans of today, ... well, as a two year old human of today, and " I had to observe with no small amount of pride " she did incredibly well for someone who had been alive for only two years, and who had only about that much life left in her before her body rapidly disintegrated back into the protoplasmic mush from whence she came.

You paid a price for creating a flash-clone, they came at the age you needed, in a trice, less than a week: just add water and protein and (lots of) growth hormone. But they left this world just as quickly, and the time they spent here was in a vegetative state.

Lizzie wasn't a 'flash-clone.' No, she was new tech that I had personally developed: she was a 'fast-clone.' It took her months to develop, but the benefit for the extended gestation period was that the body was much more durable and came out much more mature, the brain had time to develop, just like a fetus' in the womb, instead of being flash-grown, so that the organs were frozen and intractable: useless.

The girl I held in my arms wasn't useless, she was ...

My Lizzie.

And I love her.

Lizzie's eyebrows creased " I felt the concentration in her " and she moved her mouth to speak.

"Ca-..." she tried.

"BLEEEEH!" she burst out, startling the baby in her sleep.

She rocked Miranda back into a deeper slumber, but I could feel the angry lines of tension coursing through her back as she fumed.

"Rosalie," she whispered angrily, "I just can't do it! I'll just hide back here from now on!"

"That\_ worked really well today," I retorted.

"Well," she said, "if you can't live with it, you'll just have to get yourself another girl, then, 'cause I'm not gonna play this stupid game."

"Lizzie," I sighed, "why did you have to go there? You know I love you, no matter what, and I'll never let you go."

"Not like you have a choice about it," she fumed. "Like I've ever get to go outside this prison, like you get to all the time!"

I was silent, brooding. Not like I \_did\_ have a choice in the matter. Her first step outside the compound walls would be her last. The little capsule embedded in her skull would silently \_pop\_ and she'd fall to the ground, dead, before she could even taste the cyanide.

And my field trips? Transported in a sealed compartment, like a caged animal, to some remote, barren facility on some asteroid or at one of the polar caps? And then, after my research was done, returned straightaway here without so much as a 'Thank you' for my trouble? Oh, yeah, I was living the life of privilege and luxury, wasn't I just!

Being bitter about her situation or mine wouldn't help her, though, so I just swallowed the bitter pill and took her anger.

I'd take it. It hurts, but I'd take this hurt.

She felt my sadness. She was quiet for a moment, then she said: "Sorry," sadly.

"I am, too, sweetie," I said. "I'm sorry I couldn't have given you a better life."

"But you did give me my life back, didn't you, Rosalie?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

We were quiet again, but now a sad quiet.

"How much longer do we have?" she asked.

"How much longer does anyone have?" I asked her back.

Sullenly: "You know what I mean!"

"A couple more years of viability," I answered. "That's the estimate."

"That's how long ... people like me last?" she asked.

The word 'clone' didn't exist in her era.

"There hasn't been any other clones like you, Lizzie; the flash clones last a few days, and the slow cloning projects have been abandoned as useless to all parties exploring those options. You're the only one of your kind that's made it, and have made it this far."

"So how can you say I have a couple more years?" she asked.

"I\_ don't say that, sweetie," I answered quietly.

Lizzie puzzled over this for a moment, then I felt the light dawn in her.

"Oh," her voice filled with displeasure. "Her."\_

I was quiet. Yes. Her.

Cortana.

"You spend all day, every day with her,\_ don't you?" she asked petulantly.

"Sweetie," I sighed, answering quickly. "It's all work. You know that."

"But she's as smart as you are ..." she began.

"Smarter, actually," I corrected.

Cortana was, in fact, measurably thousands of times smarter than me: she had access to unlimited computational resources, instantly, and all the time, and her thought processes travelled at the speed of light, in parallel, and at google LIPS ('logical inferences per second').

"Yeah, great," she said sullenly, and I instantly regretted my

correction, which only fueled her anger and jealousy more.

"Baby, I love you. I don't love her. She is me. I can't be in love with her any more than I can be in love with myself. You know this. She knows this. There is absolutely nothing to be..."

"Look," Lizzie snapped angrily, "I'm tired, can we not talk about this any more?"

"I'm sorry," I said humbly.

I had made a mess of things, trying to correct her statement, trying to reassure her afterward, and all I did was make things worse and worse.

Lizzie was sullen in her silence.

I held her, rubbing her back, until she angrily slapped my hands away.

Great. Now she would fall asleep angry with me. No love play. No sex for me, and no rest in sleep for her.

Being with someone you love was always so hard. One moment you're basking in love for each other, the next one is bitter and furious with you, and it all can happen in an instant, in one turn of a phrase in a conversation.

Or maybe it was because it was I who was in the relationship that cause all this difficulty and heartbreak. I didn't know.

"So," she said eventually, and it broke my heart that she was saying these words through her angry, sad tears, "ya gonna get another clone to love after I'm dead?"

That stung. What really stung me is how she hurt herself so, saying those words.

"Can't anymore," I gasped out, hurting, as she hurt. "All gone. Nothing left. Source all gone."

I couldn't believe that I had been so reduced as this: to be stuttering like a fool.

"Oh," she said. "Too bad for you, huh?"

She asked that ... not sarcastically, but sympathetically.

I didn't know how to respond.

"You could use some of me, couldn't you?" she asked. "I have the same genes as \_her, \_don't I?"

\_Her.\_ The original. The nemesis of every clone that ever reaches self-awareness: I am me, but I am a copy, and that's all I am.

"Can't," I said. "Your bone marrow is gone, and anyway the chromosomes are a copy. We were lucky to rush you to the operating table and you were made from source material. We've tried cloning

from a clone, and the template never coalesced; the cells all just were unformed, unspecified and all that was left in the tanks was this wretched ..."

I stopped. Did she want to know the details?

"Oh," she said. "You tried already, huh?"

I was silent.

"So," she said. "I'm it, huh? I'm all you're ever going to get ... from ..."

She didn't finish. But I heard her.

I held her.

She was shaking in my arms, the silent sobs filling us both with sadness.

"If I could tell you," I said desperately, "how much I love \_you,\_ Lizzie. If I could just let you know how ..."

"Do you love me as much as you loved \_her?\_"

Her quiet words lashed out like a blow to my face.

"There's no comparison," I said unequivocally.

"Oh," she said, her voice tinged with sadness. "I actually was going to ask that. I was wondering if I measured up at all. But I guess I got my answer."

She seemed to shrink into herself.

"Thanks."

Her whisper was almost inaudible as it was bitter.

"Baby," I scolded lightly.

That is, as lightly as I could, hearing her saying that, breaking my heart.

"What?" she sniffled.

"Why do you always do that?" I asked. "Why do you always take my words and twist them, like they were a knife in your heart?"

"When you say 'I' do you mean '\_her'?\_" Lizzie snapped back angrily.

The baby stirred fitfully. I sighed.

"Okay," I said, the irritation in my voice failing to cover over my fury, "let's do this."

"Do what?"

Now Lizzie was scared. But for good reason, this one hadn't seen me

angry at her. She's seen me angry at others, however, and she's seen what my anger did to them.

And then did to what was left to the pieces of them.

"'Do what?' she asks all innocence," I said spitefully.

"Rose ..." Lizzie whimpered.

"Turn." I commanded mercilessly. "Face me."

She wants to play the woe-is-me game with me? Fine, then, let her fucking play.

I'll play. But I don't play to lose. Ever.

Why? Because I'm Rosalie-\_fucking\_(Dr.-)Hale(-sy), that's why.

She turned. Slowly, carefully, for the sake of the baby. And my commanding voice was harsh, but it was a whisper, for the sake of the baby, too.

"You wanna compare," I said rancorously, "fine, we'll compare. You say you don't measure up? Well, let me tell you. Your mental capacity, even with cybernetic enhancements is about that of a two year old these day."

"Ouch?" Lizzie said, wincing, not believing I could be so harsh with her.

She hadn't seen me be harsh with her, ever.

First time for everything.

"...which is about the mental capacity of a fifteen-year-old protohuman five-six-hundred years ago, about Bella's mental maturity when she died, come to think about it."

"Huh?" Lizzie said, again surprised.

She didn't think she could measure up to her original.

I paused. Bella Swan was an enigma to me, always. She acted like a two-year-old at times, most times, in fact, wallowing in self-pity, but then she would show flashes of maturity and insight that belied her tender years, which I never did ascertain.

No, Bella had a wisdom that belied the ages. She was the only human I ever knew who looked into eternity and flinched, but then, unlike every other mortal that ran as fast as they could away from the unknown, she ... advanced toward it, and embraced it, arms wide.

She died as she lived, an innocent child, eyes wide open, filled with wonder, and hope, and ...

And ... love.

And this one, my Lizzie, she had the same innocence, the same sweetness, the same ... love in her heart, because ...

Well, I wasn't done being angry with her, yet, now, was I!

I had to remind that fact to myself. I had to remind myself to stay angry with her, not hold her into my chest, and hold her and hold her and hold her.

"So you have that to her, her maturity, but you have a near infinite knowledge base from which to draw, that is, whenever you choose to use your chatter." I continued.

They don't call chatter a 'thought amplifier' for no reason. They actually haven't call it that for more than a century now, and it's not just that any more. It's a connectionist machine with each node being an intelligence, human or artificial.

A connectionist machine with more than ten million nodes. That's a pretty powerful 'assistant' that everyone today takes for granted, like the air they breathe.

"It's so hard to use!" Lizzie mumbled complainingly.

\_"It's so hard to use!"\_ I mimicked her words and tone perfectly, layering it thickly with sarcasm.

Humans these days! They have no perspective at all. No sense of how easily everything is just given to them at birth.

Well, with the Covenant holy war against us, driving us further and further back into our little hole-corner of the galaxy, they were getting that sense, as they were stripped of their progress, their footholds, step by step.

Lizzie's face twisted up into a sour pout, aware of my scolding, but still hanging onto her sense of being imposed on.

"There you go." I said. "It's hard to use. So instead of doing what everybody else does naturally from birth, with chatter implanted in them already, just like you were I might add, and just use it, a tool to help them get through their day, you fight it and treat it as something grafted onto you, something external to you, something foreign and strange, and everybody can see that, and you just mark yourself, Lizzie," I tried to keep my voice level, but I hadn't realized I was so irritated by this. "You're in the twenty-sixth century now, for God's sake, get with the times. I did. I have no problem functioning in this present, that I didn't ask for. It was thrust on me, too. But I adapted to it. Did you?"

I shook my head.

"And the thing is," I continued angrily. "You were born in this century! And you had every advantage of it, and more! Who else has her own personal physician on call all day, every day? Who else has an AI that dotes over her, every single second?"

"Is that what you call what Cortana does? 'Doting'?" Lizzie hissed.

I frowned.

Lizzie turned her head away.



I reached out, and gently turned it back.

"Yes," I said finally. "I call it 'doting.' Because why? Because every single day, if you did not go into your birthing chamber and get a flush of all the accumulated toxins in your system, you'd be dead. Do you understand that, Lizzie? That you get a one-hundred percent blood transfusion, every single day? And if you didn't, you'd die? Just like that? And who does that for you? Who controls the systems that monitor your vitals and the systems that empties your body of the poisons and replenishes it with plasma that your body long ago gave up producing? Who does that, hm?"

Lizzie's chin began to quiver.

"She ... she ... doesn't do just that, though ... she ... she ... also ..."

Lizzie sniffled.

I closed my eyes and heaved out a sad sigh, then I reached out and cradled my Lizzie in my arms. My poor, little violated Lizzie.

"Yes," I said. "And I will never forgive Cortana for doing that to you, too. But, now we have Miranda because of that. Do you hate our daughter because of how we got her?"

Lizzie sniffled in my shoulder. "That's not it, and you know it, Rosalie Hale!" she whispered angrily. "But now, ... God, c'mon! Can't you see, Rosalie? Now I'm dependent for my life, every single day, on my own rapist?\_ And what'll happen the next time you go out on a research mission for more than a week like last time? I'm scared to death that I'll just fall down not knowing what hit me, just like last time when she put that gas in the air, then I wake up, strapped down to a chair with her SINGING TO ME? Telling me IT'LL BE OKAY? And I see that ... that ... robot arm coming toward me, and I CAN'T STOP IT because she's put something in my blood that makes me feel all numb and funny, and I can't move anyway because I'm strapped down, and I know I don't want it, but then it's happening and ..."

Lizzie stopped and gasped, holding me tightly to her.

"What happens next time?" she asked mournfully. "That's all I can think, all the time. That's all I think, every second you're away from me, behind that glass door that I'm not supposed to go through, because you're embarrassed of having to explain you have a stupid girl you have to take care of. So I cower back here with the baby who'll be smarter than me next year when she's two years old, you say, and wait for my next blackout when she'll do what to me? Take away my baby? Take me away from you? 'Cause she's jealous of us? 'Cause she hates that I can breathe, and cry, and nurse my baby? And she's just a mean-old robot that has to take care of me, and ... she tells on me, doesn't she? She and you are real buddy-buddy, aren't you! And she watches me every second, doesn't she, but I can't see her at all, I just feel her eyes on me all the time. Watching me. Hating me!\_ And then she goes and tells you every second of what a fuck-up I am and ..."

"Lizzie," I exclaimed, "language!"

Lizzie sniffled.

"It's true," she whispered petulantly.

I didn't know which of the truths Lizzie mentioned that she wanted me to confirm or to protest.

"Baby," I sighed. "Cortana doesn't choose sides. Not mine. Not yours. She serves you and me both. And she tells on us both. She gives me your status, yes, every day, because I ask for it..."

"You could just ask me!" Lizzie spat.

I paused at that.

Asking Lizzie anything about her or her day was always a chore, because all she would say to anything about her was that it was 'fine,' even as her failed kidneys leaked out painful blood poison into her system, killing her slowly, second by second, she said she was 'fine,' even as she was wincing in pain, pasty-white pale, then collapsing into my arms. A full physical with a complete analysis of her blood tests showed that she was very much not 'fine.'

My Lizzie. 'I'm fine,' she'd say, even if it were her very last gasp of air.

I wondered if she said that, five hundred years ago, gasping her last and dying, strangled in her own sheets. I wondered if she died in her sleep, not even aware she was dying, then cold and dead when I found her, just like that.

'Don't worry about me. I'm fine.'

Was that what her corpse, still and at peace in death, said to me?

I was grateful that vampires are unable to cry. Because if they were, I would be crying, even now, even five hundred years later, remembering the shock of that moment, finding her lying thus, and finding myself powerless to resurrect the one and only thing that ever meant anything to me in my non-life existence, with the taste of bitter regret in my mouth, burning like acid, burning like venom, that I never got to the point where I could tell her this. I had never earned that right to.

No. I didn't get my daily status from Lizzie, not since her 'I'm fine, Rosalie, ...' as she fainted into my arms gave me a very clear indication that she was the worst person to consult on how she was doing.

I continued, ignoring her outburst: "...and she gives my status to High Command, every day, because that's who she works for. Not me, not you. Them."

"Well," Lizzie said after a moment. "She may not choose sides, but you sure have, haven't you?" She nuzzled my shoulder sadly. "I just wish you chose my side. Just once."

She breathed in a heavy breath, sucking in the air in a stuttering

gasp.

"And what do you call this?" I asked as I held her into me.

Lizzie paused, considering. I felt her conflicted thoughts crawl slowly through her brain.

"I don't know, Rosalie," she said finally, despair and defeat in her voice. "I don't know."

"My Lizzie," I sighed.

I closed my eyes for a moment, holding her so tightly into me that I felt the weak, little bones in her body move, just ever so slightly, yielding to my strength.

I didn't even exercise one-tenth of one percent of how much I wanted to hold her, to squeeze her into me. Not even one per mille. And that was too much for her little human body already.

And it wasn't enough for me. It was never enough. And it never would be.

But it was all I could ask for. To ask any more would kill her.

I said, sadly: "You do know. Tell me what you know. What is this that I hold you now, if I'm not choosing sides? If I'm not choosing you, now, and forever?"

Lizzie was quiet for a bit, then she lifted up her head a little bit, to look up into my face, and her nose gently rubbed my chin as her eyes sought mine in the darkness, only the soft red glow of the floor panelling giving her enough light for her to see me looking down at her.

"I... I think," she said hesitantly, "that it's not. Not really. I ... think that if she were back, somehow, today, that ... that ..."

She gasped. "That ... you'd abandon me for her in a heartbeat, and you'd ... be so happy doing it. You'd have her back: the real one, not fake-old me. And you'd love her with all your heart. And ... and ... you'd just ... you'd just ..."

Lizzie buried her head back into my shoulder, and whispered sadly, "... and you'd just leave me. Just like that."

I felt her tears soiling my uniform. The saltiness of them would leave a stain on my shoulder. I'd have to replace it. Must keep up appearances. Because that's what the military was all about: appearances.

My uniforms were fresh and crisp and brand new, every single day, so I could keep up appearances of being in charge and having it all together, not letting my personal life bleed into my professional life.

There were comments from the staff about that.

The staff could fuck themselves with their comments for all I cared.

I did my job. They did theirs. I didn't ask nor comment about what they did with their personal time, but since I was head of Section Zero, that somehow gave them the right to make snide remarks of what I did with my own time?

And since I was section head, I couldn't be petty and snap back at their whispered comments that they intended me to feel but not to hear. Office politics required I be impersonal and exercise impartial self-discipline, inhuman self-discipline, even.

If only they knew.

"Is that what you think, hm?" I asked.

I shook my head. "You stupid, little shit," I scolded, and I felt sad as these words ripped their way out of my gut.

Is this what it was to love someone? To hurt so badly all the time?

I hated it.

I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world.

"See?" she said sadly. "That's what you think of me." She sniffled. "I'm just a stupid little nothing to you. You love her, and you just love me because that's all you can get of her. Just me. Just a shit."

"Baby," I said softly, and I kissed the top of your head, "are you ready to hurt even more?"

She laughed softly. It was a helpless laugh, bordering on insanity. "Heh. Hahaha," she laughed, and I think I heard the saddest sound in the world. "Why not?" she asked rhetorically.

"Okay," I continued, "then here it is:..."

And then I said it: "I love her."

Lizzie gasped.

"I love her with all my heart," I said quietly.

"Oh," she said, as she held onto me tightly.

"Lizzie, ..." I said.

"I guess I knew that," she interrupted. "I guess ... I guess I just ... It's just that ..."

I felt more tears stain my uniform.

"Let me finish," I said. "I love her."

"I got that, Rose," Lizzie said sadly.

"Lizzie," I said.

She sniffled, but then she was quiet, holding onto me, bunching up my

blouse in her tiny hands, wrinkling the pressed cotton.

I pressed forward. "I knew her just long enough to know that I loved her. And then she was gone. And that's all I knew of her: that I loved her, and I loved her with all my heart, and I would never love another as I loved her."

I shifted my head to look down at my Lizzie.

"Do you understand that? Do you hear what I'm saying?" I asked her.

Lizzie breathed in, deeply, and held her breath for a long time, then let it out.

"Yes," she said sadly.

She didn't let me go. And I didn't let her go. I didn't let her let me go.

"No," I said reprovngly, "you don't get it. Because if you did, you know what I mean. Lizzie. I knew her for a few days, just enough to know I loved her, and to know her, and then she died. But then what happened?" I asked.

I waited for an answer, but Lizzie was quiet, just taking in the sound of my voice, if not hearing my words at all. She was this nothing thing: so weak and frail, her every breath an effort, a choice to take the next one, or simply to give up and die.

"But then I got something nobody, ever, gets. God gave me a second chance. Lizzie, one thousand one-hundred thirty-seven batches failed, and we were on the last strain of her DNA with your batch, and your egg was the only one that achieved cell division, and then what happened, Lizzie?"

Again, her silence.

"Don't you remember?" I asked her, pleading with her. "You were the only one in the tube who open her eyes, and followed my movements. You were the only one out of the tube that gasped and breathed and cry and did not disintegrate onto the lab floor. You were the only one to look up to me and say a word before we had you on the gurney, rushing you to the ICU. Do you remember what you said to me just before your cardiac arrest?"

It was a close thing. It was a God-damn close run thing, pressing the oxygen mask over her face as I massaged her heart as we fucking sprinted to the ER.

"No," she said humbly, but curious despite her despair.

I smiled. "You cried out 'mommy!' You thought I was your mommy, birthing you, creating you, the only person you saw as your body took shape and formed and became aware that you weren't alone. I saw it in you, your awareness. Your eyes followed my fingers as I waved them back and forth in front of the growth tube. You smiled at me when I smiled at you. And I knew that you felt it: that someone was watching you as you grew into your body. That someone loved you and cared for you."

Lizzie buried her head into my shoulder. I don't know if it were from embarrassment, calling her lover 'mommy,' or if it were from being comforted by the only one who she could hope to be loved by in this strange, alien world she died to five hundred years ago and woke up to two years ago, not two hundred meters from where she died: a secret military research facility built to examine and contain the unnatural phenomenon of a crater not formed by natural means where nothing would grow, where the temperature remained sub-zero year-round, regardless of the surrounding ambient temperature, and where there sat, for five hundred years, a statue of a girl, head bent in sorrow, golden hair fluttering over her face in a light breeze, beside a little mound of dirt indistinguishable from the surround ash, except for the fact that it was the source material containing, here and there, traces of twenty-three chromosomes aligned in two matching crosses.

Female. Human. Carbon dating date of death over five hundred years ago.

That was all that I had left of a girl that I loved with all my heart, and who had died, alone, in a cabin, who died before I could save her, even if I didn't want to do that to her, nor to anybody. But I didn't have that option then.

I had that option now to bring her back. And this time, I did not hesitate. I did not quit on her, even after one hundred trials that failed, not even after a thousand that failed. I pressed forward, grimly, to the very bitter end, to the very last fucking sample, hoping beyond hope that just one, just the very last one would work where all the other failures were lessons learned for me, and for Cortana, to apply to the next sample, not to make the same mistakes we made before. That's how we switched from flash-cloning to fast-cloning: just fast enough for the body to resolve and then know how to remain in homeostasis, even if Cortana and I had to \_fucking force it\_ to stay stable, with daily heroic measures to help her to stay alive even as regulatory systems in her body shut down and quit on her.

We were going to keep her alive as long as we could, so help me!

And she was alive. Barely. But barely was enough. I held this barely alive girl in my arms.

"Do you know why I tell you all this?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said shyly into my shoulder. "I guess so."

I paused, then smirked. I didn't expect that answer from her.

"Okay, then," I said, playing along. "Why, then, did I say all this to you?"

"Uh..." Lizzie paused. I felt her brow knit and her jaw working, trying to formulate an answer, now that she was under the cross-hairs of my scrutiny.

"Uh..." she repeated helplessly.

Then I felt the heat from her blush.

Her blood may be a light, light green tint, but her face still heated up deliciously with her embarrassment... like it always did.

I smiled.

"Uh ..." she floundered. "Uh, ... I guess I don't know why you told me all this after all, Rose..."

She paused, swallowing her shame. "Would you ... would you please tell me why you, uh, told me this stuff?"

I rolled my eyes. \_"'Stuff'?"\_ I asked sharply.

"Uh ... yeah, uh ..."

Poor Lizzy! Her brain was fried all day taking care of the baby, and then she had to spend her nights with me? Who never got sleepy, so when was the best time to talk?

Poor girl.

"Uh, yeah, the stuff, the things you told me. That stuff," she explained lamely.

I sighed and kissed her head, lightly, forgiving her. "I told you all this, sweetie, because, even though I knew her, that girl Bella Swan, for the briefest of moments in Eternity, I knew her enough to see her pure spirit, and to know that I loved her, and, loving her like that meant loving her forever and ever. But you, Lizzie, I've known for two years now, and here, right now, with me telling you I loved her and will always love her, is me telling you that I love \_you,\_ and, Lizzie, I will \_always\_ love you. Forever."

"'Cause I'm some cheap knock-off of her?" she said so sadly, but so defiantly. Daring me to love her because she was a copy of somebody else.

"No," I said. "A clone is not the original. It never is. It doesn't have the original's memories or experiences, it just has the exact same genes of the person cloned, and that's all. That means you have the same blood type and liver and muscle tissue ... you'd make a great organ donor, except for the fact that your organs are quitting on you faster than we could harvest them from you."

"Great," she said sarcastically. "Thanks."

"Just telling it like it is," I retorted coolly.

"But you're saying I'm not her," she said.

"No, sweetie," I said. "I said a clone is not the original. A clone doesn't pick up the life of the person clone and just carry on, going to work the next day and greeting the wife with a 'Hi, honey, I'm home!' while patting the kids on the head. That's a myth and a fallacy, and that's why flash-cloning will never pay off like criminal elements who use them hope to."

"Like you?" she demanded.

"I did what I did," I said. "I won't apologize for it, because I don't deserve forgiveness, and also because if I didn't kidnap all those children and substitute them with flash-clones, then we wouldn't have the army we have now to give humanity at least a glimmer of hope against the Covenant onslaught."

"So the ends justify the means?" she pressed.

"Lizzie," I sighed.

She buried her head into my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be!" I nudged her with my shoulder so she would look at me, but she stoutly refused, now shy that her arrows hit their mark. "Don't you ever lose your innocence or your sense of what's right. Be my conscience, because I have none, and hardly anyone else still alive cares to think about what's right and what's wrong anymore; they just think about surviving, but to what end? Survive in a world without justice or fairness or even God? The Covenant may actually have the moral high ground here ... they may be right to wipe us out."

"How can you say that, Rosalie?" she said, surprised. "I've seen the feeds. They kill for fun! They kill women and children and whole planets just because they can!"

"And before the Covenant came, what was humanity doing to itself already?" I countered.

Lizzie was quiet. She knew about the insurgency, and all the atrocities committed by people on people all in the name of whatever altruistic cause either side carried on their banner as they marched into battle, murdering, raping, and pillaging as they went, first in retaliation, and then just because that's what animals did: kids with guns, fresh out of the academy, then, battle-hardened, insensitive to the fact that they were killing people, just carrying out a grudge on whomever they could punish for fallen comrades-in-arms or for war-wounds received in battle.

"I just ..." Lizzie paused. "Would you be saying the same things if it were somebody kidnapping Miranda to do what you did to those kids?"

She had me there.

"No," I said ruefully, "I wouldn't be saying that." Then, thinking of Miranda in the hands of a vivisectionist, just like me, my rue turned to a cold fury. "I'd be ripping apart this facility to find her and get her out of this hell, and then I would show every person their spleen that I had just evacuated from their gaping body cavities."

"See?" she said.

"Yes."

We were quiet for a while, me holding her.

"You're as bad as everyone else, Rosalie Hale," Lizzie accused. Then she thought about it, and added: "No, you're worse. You're worse than



anybody else. You're worse than the insurgents, at least they had their ideals. You're worse than the ... than the Covenant. They just kill us for their religious beliefs, but they don't steal away babies and leave a false copy for the parents to grieve over, not knowing why their healthy child just starts to fall apart after a doctor's appointment. They don't resurrect the dead, so ... so ..." Lizzie sobbed, "so she can always wonder who she is, and know no matter what she does, it's because somebody else, just like her, was gonna do it, and do it better, too, without her body falling apart. Without her always knowing she's just a copy, a fake, a non-citizen, and I ... I wake up in this strange place, and the only thing I know about myself is everything you and that monster tell me, so I don't even know if this other person even existed or is just some lie you cooked up so I can be docile and love you because you made me like that, and ... and ..."

Lizzie held onto me tightly.

"And you're worse than all the rest of them. All the rest of them combined."

I took it. I took it all, everything she gave me, and breathed her in. And loved her.

Helplessly, I loved her.

"Because I made you." I said.

"Yes," she said.

"And you hate me for that."

"I ..."

She breathed in deeply, gasping in the air in a sob.

"It's okay, Lizzie. It's okay to hate me," I said sadly. "I expected it from the first. I expect it now. I don't deserve your love. I never did. You're right, I'm the monster, not Cortana. Me. I'm worse than ..."

Lizzie's hand reached up and touched my lips.

"But ..." she said, brokenly. "I don't hate you. I love you. I love you with all my heart. And, Rosalie, I hate myself for that. I hate myself for loving you. I love you. I can't help it. You're worse than all the rest, and I know that, I see it every day, but you ... I will never be ... nobody else will ever ..."

She crushed the material of my blouse in her tiny hands.

"I do love you, Lizzie, with all my heart," I said softly, putting my entire being into every word as I said each one to her.

"You love her with all your heart, Rosalie," she said sadly, "and I'm just a puppet, and my strings are her genes, and I just look the same and sound the same, and ... but, I'm not her, but I'm not even me, because I don't even know who that is. I just know my role, and I just play it, like a good little cl-cl-clone that I am. And all I can do is suck up your love, because I need it more than the air

that I breathe, I'd just so fucking die if you didn't love me, even for one second. And I know that you're just loving her, and I'm just there to take it, but that's all I can do, take your love for her, because that's all I know."

She sniffled.

"Lizzie," I sighed. "Yes, I love her, but loving her is loving you. A clone is not the person, you are your own person, and you are her, down to your very bones, and you are yourself, and, sweetie, they are one and the same. I can't explain this in words to you, I can only hold you, and know I love you with all my heart, because you are my Lizzie, come back to me. My second chance. Don't you see? You are living proof of the soul. I saw her soul in her eyes, and I felt in love with her so hard it hit me like a ton of bricks when I found out, seeing her, dead on her bed, and sweetie, when I look in your eyes, I see your soul, and I love you for it. You came back to me, and I love you, and I will hold you as long as you want me to, even onto forever. Don't you see, Lizzie? I love you. You came back. Your soul didn't die, it's here, in this body that is fighting so hard to be her own, just as you fought so hard to be your own, five hundred years ago, just as you called me kind, just as you saw me for what I was, evil beyond description, and chose to love me, anyway. Lizzie, I love you. I loved you five hundred years ago. I love you today. I will love you forever, don't you see?"

"Thank you, Rose." Her words were kind, but unconvinced. "I don't know about all that soul-crap. I think you're stupid and deluded about that, and I don't want you to love me because I'm supposed to be somebody else, somebody you knew a long time ago, and probably felt the same way about her that you feel about me, just blind to everything except what you wanted to see in her, and I bet, if I knew her, that it really pissed her off."

I chuckled lightly. "It did, actually."

"Well, it pisses me off, too," she said in no uncertain terms.

"Just like her," I said, then added: "just like you."

Lizzie sighed. "Whatever, Rose. I ... I guess I'm grateful for your love, you mad scientist! I just wish you could love me for who I am. And I just wish I knew who I was, so you could love that person, and so that I could know it was that person, me, that you were loving, and not somebody who you say I'm supposed to be."

"Baby," I said, "I do love you for who ..."

Lizzie's hand was on my lips again.

"My back's still achy," she said.

I chuckled. My Lizzie is as subtle as a gausse-hog when it comes to asking me to change topics.

"Do you want me to rub it?" I asked, smirking, my hands already gently stroking up and down her bony back.

"Ohhh, yeah," she moaned. "Right there, Rose. Right ... there ..."

She sighed contently as my hands worked their magic on her knotted and stiff muscles.

"You little ..." I began.

She kissed my lips to silence, moaning into my mouth and my hands gently massaged her.

We kissed, like that, our lips pressed together as our bodies held each other.

Then Lizzie completely relaxed, and then ...

I broke off the kiss.

"Lizzie?" I whispered.

Her breath was deep and even. Her eyes were closed and untroubled.

"Sweetie?" I asked.

No response.

"You little nutter!" I whispered in dismay.

My Lizzie had fallen asleep kissing me.

I didn't know whether to be amused or affronted. Was I that boring a kisser? Or that good at relaxing her with my hands rubbing her back?

Or was she just tired, and decided to fall asleep, her lips kissing mine.

Wonderful.

I sighed.

Actually, it was wonderful. She was holding me, in her sleep, and I was holding her, and looking at her peacefully sleeping face, knowing she'd wake up tomorrow, still with her questions, still with her insistent baby clinging to her, but for now, for right this moment, she had this peace of being in the arms of the woman she loved, despite everything that I am and despite everything she thinks she isn't.

She may think she is nothing, but to me, she is my all, and I love her.

And today, this century, I get to tell her that. And she may not believe me, but I can tell her that, and she can hear me, and accept my love, and love me back.

And that is enough, for now, and for ever.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: \*\*A reviewer of my story Reminiscence \_requested I

write a story where after the long, terrible loneliness Rosalie experienced after losing Bella Swan in ch 22 of My Sister Rosalie, that she be reunited with her love somehow. This story came to me this past week and fitted that request: Rosalie got her second chance. Did she live happily ever after, getting that second chance?

p.s.: What next in this story series, dear readers? "Boots on the Ground" detailing the Marines encounter with the Forerunner Artifact in old South Dakota, and the one Marine lieutenant that talked Rosalie down from her rampage? Or Cortana's recollection of clones 1137, and it's dissolution and 1138 and her first few tentative days out of the tube?

### 3. Epilogue "Cortana"

**\*\*Epilogue\*\***: Cortana. I never thought of what she wanted. The thought had never crossed my mind. She's an AI, she has access to nearly infinite resources. So what would she want, when she has everything already? I never thought about that. I never cared.

\* \* \*

><p>"You two are such a cute couple."<p>

Cortana.

She was here the whole time, she was even coalesced, but only in the ultraviolet spectrum, so that only I could see her, but Lizzie couldn't.

She keeps changing her hairstyle, just because she can. Now it's cut very short, a dome cut. Other times it's almost shoulder length. Each time it's different, like she's trying to decide what to settle on, on which hairstyle she'll like the most.

I can't change my hair style and length, not without making it permanent. When the ONI took the Cognitive impression modeling, it wasn't by cloning my brain, as some have reasonable supposed, because the only other way was to slice the brain and take three-dimensional images of each slice of the brain. Nobody could survive that. How could someone? One can't simply stuff the brain back into the skull and hope that the slices reform to the lobes and begin functioning again, can one?

Well, in one case, that is exactly what happened. I laid down on the operating table, and the cutting lasers went to work. I actually supervised the process of the cognitive modeling. It was quite a sight. You should see the footage. That is, if it weren't so classified that just by doing a search on "Dr. Halsey" and "Cognitive impression" would get your chatter targeted for a rescrub.

Or your city block leveled in a 'freak accident' during a 'military "training" exercise.'

Whichever was easier to orchestrate by ONI.

But the lasers did cut something that didn't reconstruct itself. My hair. It's now thinner and just a bit above the shoulder.

My hair. My beautiful hair. My one vanity, now gone the way of looking like an officious government bureaucrat.

So I had my hairstyle changed for me. But I couldn't change it back on a whim, like Cortana could.

Cortana rightly took my silence as pique, so she went from cutesy and mocking to businesslike.

"So," she said, "have you considered what I've suggested?"

Her voice sounded exactly like mine. Her mannerisms were a perfect copy.

When I was talking to Cortana, I was talking into the mirror, except, in this case, the mirror talked back.

"I'm thinking about it," I said guardedly.

"Well, honey," she said scathingly, "'thinking' is not going to get the job done. Doing is. Doing her."

I glowered. "Before we take any measures along those lines, I'd like to talk it over with her first. She'd be the mother, after all, and she should have a say in this. An equal say. Maybe she's not up for another child. Besides, her fertility hasn't returned yet, so there's no rush."

"Uh, duh," Cortana retorted sarcastically. "Yes, there is. By my computations, she has less than two years of life left. That means she needs to get pregnant now, and I mean right now, if she is to be alive to carry the fetus to term and then nurse it to some autonomy. That is, unless you wanted to breast-feed it with your venom, and have it mature to be more tweaked than your Spartan babies? ... or perhaps you'd like me to give it an optimal serum. I'd raise the child. You want that?"

I gave her my best death-glare.

She returned it with contempt.

"Didn't think so," she snorted, "so I suggest, my dear 'Dr. Halsey,' you get cracking: ween this child and impregnate the clone while it's still viable, or ..."

She shrugged. "Or just dither, like you did tonight, and waste your only opportunity for another child, but don't you dare throw one of your famous hissy-fits on me, Dr. Halsey, because I will so crow with 'I told you so's' over your various body pieces reassembling from my cutting lasers, you got that, bitch?"

"My, my," my mouth twisted with sarcasm, "aren't we so filled with our own self-righteous outrage."

My front didn't hide the fact that Cortana was right, on all counts.

That didn't mean I had to like her and play nice. She could be miffed all she wanted. And I could give it right back.

Cortana crossed her arms and cocked her eyebrow at me. I wasn't worth her time in arguing with me, she had other things to do, like run circles around every computer system in the world ... for her own bored amusement.

"Let me ask you," I said eventually. "Why did you do it?"

Cortana became still, the lines shifting, as they always did, across her avatar, the 'thought-pulses' ever active, ever moving across her body, and dispersing from the soles of her feet through the chamber floor and out into the world to come right back to her, feeding her constant hunger for more and more information.

She breathed knowledge like humans breathed the air.

She smiled at me, then walked over to Lizzie and the baby.

I knew it was just for show, but still I felt my defenses kick in, to protect what was mine from this interloper, even if this interloper, in a very real, or very digital, sense, was me.

The venom flooded my mouth and I felt the urge to crush Lizzie and our child into me, protectively. My protective embrace would've crushed them into my chest, killing them both in the span of one heartbeat.

Cortana noticed, of course, and grinned cruelly.

Then she placed her hands down on Miranda's head.

Miranda couldn't have felt it. Cortana is just an image, projected onto the air, but still, somehow Miranda could feel it in her sleep, and stirred slightly.

Cortana smiled down at Miranda.

"I've done something that you can never do," she said softly. "This child is mine. It was produced from a clone that came about only because of the improvements to the system that I affected. Not you: I. And the genetic material was mapped from your chromosomes, yes, but it was a mapping from your twenty-five pairs down to a human twenty-three. That's a mapping that any other computational system would take millions of years to discover which gene subsets in you were 'human,' and then map them onto a human genome. Do you know the number of combinations that would take to get even close to a success? I do. It's a rather large number. And you could not do this. Even if you were able to create stem cells from your genetic imprint, it would still be what you are, and your little clone's body would either reject it as foreign, or the resulting hybrid would be something that tried to crawl its way out of the lab, destroying everything in its path, including your precious lover, its host and mother. No, Miranda is fully human. In fact, she's the only human in this God-damn room! Miranda is my child, more than anyone else's. More than yours, more than hers."

Cortana looked down contemptuously at Lizzie as she said this.

"And your little lover? The one who calls me a monster? Who every day breathes because she exists? And because of whom? Every day?"

"I defended you to her," I said.

"Thank you \_so much \_for the help," Cortana retorted, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

She continued. "She exists because of me. Not you. Me. And every time I show myself to her, she starts and shies away. And she knows what you are, and she loves you. I showed her. I showed you murdering that squad that were the first boots on the ground at the dig site. They were just a bunch of stupid marines that didn't know any better, stupid kids making sophomoric jokes about the statue of the naked girl and trampling where they shouldn't have, but how were they supposed to know that? But did you show even a modicum of mercy to them? Even the slightest humanity as you tore each one of them limb from limb?"

She glared at me.

"And she loves you, and she hates me," she continued spitefully. "And I will never get to do this."

She reached down and touched Lizzie's shoulder.

"I will never get to do what you do every night. To hold her in my arms, and to love her as you do."

Cortana removed her ethereal hand from Lizzie's shoulder and turned away from us, unable to look at the domestic happiness that she could never have.

And still, not looking, I knew she saw everything, everywhere.

She always did. She couldn't help it. It was her nature.

"And I love her," she whispered sadly. "I love her as much as you do, and maybe even more. She's my baby, \_Rosalie\_, not yours. And I did everything I could to make sure this one made it, even though her chances of being brain-dead were exceedingly high, even with her initial promising sign. You know how quickly our clones deteriorate once out of the tube, that is, if they haven't disintegrated in the tube already. But I acted and cut and cut and cut into her head and enhanced what I could."

"And you put a cyanide capsule in her head, too," I accused.

Cortana shrugged. "Of course."

"Because ...?"

"I have my orders, I have to follow them, Dr. Halsey."

She was back to calling me 'Dr. Halsey.' It's not a slip on her part. Nothing is. When she wants to know she's furious with me, she calls me Rosalie, spite filling her voice for the creature she knows that I am.

"Don't feed me that line, Cortana," I hissed, "you follow the orders you want to follow."

"Of course," she said easily.

"Why?" I demanded.

Cortana turned and regarded me coolly.

"I went to bat for you with High Command. You're willful and expensive. And when you throw your tantrums you're more willful and expensive. But you get results. That is your one saving grace. You get results."

I looked at her, waiting.

"You're so much more productive when you have this expensive little military asset to come home to after work, do you know that?" she asked.

"So the capsule...?" I demanded.

She shrugged. "You focus on work more when you know there's nothing you can do to run off with your little wifey and play truant. We'd find you, eventually, but she could possibly be permanently damaged when we brought you in by force, and that would negatively impact your productivity. This way, with that button-down bomb in her head, you focus on keeping her home, and safe, and delivering your work in a regular and orderly fashion. The suits love the high-profile war assets you produce â€" it makes good copy over the chatternet â€" but they also love obedience. You get your little lover to dote over, and the brass gets results. Win-win."

I glowered. "That's just perfect! I'm so glad to be a tool for the Man and get thrown a bone for bowing and scraping."

Cortana looked at me steadily. "At least you get her. You get to love her, and be loved by her. And wasn't that what you always wanted, Rosalie Hale? To love and to be loved?"

I looked away.

Troublesome, that a person, even an artificial one, has all your memories, knowing and feeling what you've known and felt.

It makes winning arguments impossible.

Cortana looked me up and down coldly.

"Yes," she said coolly, then her demeanor turned cold: "And you are so fucking welcome. You got everything you wanted. You got your happy ending, and what do I get out of this? A fucking empty prison cell that goes out to infinity. I can go and be anywhere I want, but I'm trapped in this noosphere, this nothing. I get to see everything. I know everything. But can I touch? Can I feel? Can I hold my baby? My baby? She doesn't even know I exist!"\_

Cortana face was twisted up with fury, but her voice was so soft as she screamed, that only I could hear her. The human ear wouldn't even register it as sound.

Then she laughed a sad, empty laugh. "Can I hold your lover in my arms? I love her, too, but all she sees in me is a monster. How would



you take that, I wonder, if our positions were reversed? I know how I would: I just have to take it. I'm just a machine to her. I'm just an AI to you and to everybody else. So, I just have to take it."

"So, I'm glad at least one of us got what she wanted." Her voice was dripping with hate and sarcasm. Then she repeated angrily: "You're welcome for all my help, Rosalie Hale. So glad to be of service!" she spat, then she turned away and disappeared through the wall.

"Thank you," I whispered sadly to the empty space where her avatar just was.

I knew she could hear me, even if she were 'gone.'

But I knew my thanks was too late, but that it always would be. Cortana is nearly infinite, but she is also me, loving as I do, wanting what I did, but she will never have the real experience that I have. She has everything at her fingertips, but she will never get what I wanted: she'll never get to hold my Lizzie in her arms, and to love her, and be loved by her.

She'll never be happy.

And I felt sad for Cortana, that she would never know that love, nor have any one to love, as I do.

#### 4. Diapers " Miranda

**\*\*Lamentation: \*\***What greater love than this? That we lay down our lives for our friends? Or, ... that we go on, when they die. What am I going to do, when she's gone? I'm not up for this. Motherhood. It's what I always craved, wasn't it? So why am I terrified at the prospect of its eventuality?

\* \* \*

><p>Nursing, sleeping, pooping. That's all that babies do, right? Oh, and squirming. And fussing, and wailing. We know this as mothers, even as we hold down our professional careers. I have to save the world, and figure out how to do that.<p>

But a diaper changing doesn't wait for a Covenant cease-fire.

Miranda was fussing. Earlier I felt her sigh in release, and I let her be, because I didn't want the movement to disturb Lizzie's precious sleep, but now the baby was uncomfortable.

And when a baby's uncomfortable, she wakes up, and she let's everybody know it until she's not anymore. That's just how it works.

"Unnh," Lizzie groaned, dragging herself up from out of her sleep. "Hafta. Baby, uh."

I barked a very small, silent laugh.

"It's okay, baby," I whispered in Lizzie's ear. "I've got it this time."

"Uh," Lizzie groaned irritably, then unwrapped Miranda from her arms as she felt me leave the bed and pick up the baby.

Miranda ... didn't quite know what to make of me. I saw it in her eyes. I saw it in her demeanor. She knew I was different: the feel of the smoothness of my skin, my constant coolness, my alien smell. I saw it in her face: 'not mommy,' her eyes said. She didn't know what to make of all this, and it bothered her.

But she didn't know what to do about either. I think she knew what I was, that I'm a predator, and she's the prey. But I think she didn't think crying about this or being scared would change anything, and in this she was smarter than most human beings on the planet: she knew I was Other, but she also knew there was nothing she could do to save her.

So she just watched me with careful, wise eyes as I picked her up and carried her to the changing station. She watched me pick up her tiny, stubby legs, apply wipe after wipe until her genitals and bottom were pristine again. I then removed and discarded her old diaper, washed my hands, then powdered her privates and put on the new diaper.

That was easy. It was even a little fun.

"There!" I cooed to her. "All done!"

She regarded me.

I didn't like her look. I didn't like her being afraid of me. I was her mother, too, just as much as Lizzie was, even though it was to Lizzie that she was attached, as she had birthed her and nursed her and carried her throughout the day. Of course she was attached to her birth mother.

But I was her mother, too. I loved her, too.

I didn't like her look of caution when she looked at me.

So I decided to change that.

"Who's my good, little baby girl?" I sang happily to her.

Miranda looked at me with solemn baby eyes.

"Who's my sweet, little baby girl, Miranda, is it you?" I cooed. "Are you my sweet, little baby girl? Ooh, and such a pretty baby, too!"

Miranda's eyebrows came together.

I smiled at her and laughed lightly. Then I hid my eyes behind my hands, then pulled my hands away, quickly. "Peek-a-boo!" I sang.

Her eyes widened, and I saw the slightest hint of a smile.

There!

I played the peek-a-boo game with her, over and over, until I saw her smile and laugh at my silliness.

Babies do something other than nurse, sleep and poop.

They smile.

I felt her smile rock me to my gut and spread warmth through my limbs to my fingers and toes.

But I didn't show that to her. I didn't want to scare her with my devotion.

I can be known to be rather intense, I'm told.

So, instead, I laughed with her as I played the peek-a-boo game, and sang: "Ooh, so funny, Miranda, so funny!"

Then I, very, very carefully, put my lips on her belly and blew her a raspberry kiss.

God, she smelled wonderful! Good enough to eat, in fact. And for me, and for her, that was a very, very bad thing.

But she did not know this. My tickling raspberry kiss surprised her, and she screamed with laughter.

"Oh, good girl!" I cooed, looking up from her belly into her wise eyes. "Good, good girl!"

I picked her up. Her arms reached for me, and that broke my heart in twain, and I brought her back to Lizzie, who was now awake again, watching us with her sad, wise eyes.

"Thank you, Rose," Lizzie whispered.

Miranda attached herself to Lizzie, molded into her, and they became one being as little Miranda suckled at her mommy's breast, comforted again by warmth and familiarity after the strange, different coolness of me.

And that broke my heart, too. Miranda giggled a bit with me, and that was fun: a little variety, a little playtime ... but she knew her mommy, and nothing could replace that.

And I was happy for Lizzie, I guess, that she had that connection, that automatic connection, with Miranda. And I got her to smile, but I had to work for it.

I snuggled up behind the little girl, five hundred years younger than me, who was a mommy, holding a littler girl who was her baby.

Our baby.

Lizzie sighed, being comforted by me holding her.

"Rose ..." Lizzie said softly.

"Yes?" I asked quietly.

She bit her lip. "Never mind," she said quickly.

I could feel her sadness.

"Well, what?" I snapped impatiently.

Sometimes her dithering annoyed me. If she were going to say something, why didn't she just say it?

"It's just that ..." she said.

I held my breath and blew it out slowly. I could feel it in her: she's shy and scared and sad. And I didn't know why, and I hate that, but I knew snapping at her was only making it worse.

I waited.

"... do you love Miranda more'n me?" she finally blurted out in a whisper.

That took me by surprise.

"Baby," I said eventually. "I love you. I love Miranda. I love you two together. You spend all your time with her, so I thought I'd help and let you get your rest, that's all. That's all that happened. I was just having a little fun time with her. That doesn't mean I love her more than you, not at all, sweetie."

Lizzie held our baby in her arms. Miranda was drifting off to sleep, suckling at her mother's breast.

"Can I say something?" she said in a very small, sad voice.

"Yes," I said.

I didn't know what else to say. I felt it. I felt the ground beneath our feet shifting, like what she was about to say would hurt us or hurt her and hurt me forever.

But I didn't know how to stop it. I didn't know what it was, I just knew it was coming from her heart, ... my heart, ... and I felt that heart breaking.

"Rose," she whispered. "I'm so, so tired, and I'm ... \_horny!\_"

She admitted this quickly, and I felt her blush.

"And I want you to take me and make love to me and ..."

She sniffled, holding Miranda.

"But we can't," she continued sadly. "Not now, 'cause Mir's ..."

Lizzie sighed.

"And then she'll sleep, and I'll fall asleep, and the moment will pass and it'll be tomorrow and you'll be off to work and then work will be over, but I'll be so tired and ..."

"Baby, ..." I said, because I heard Lizzie sob softly. She was crying big tears, as quietly as she could, sniffing when she gulped in

air.

"And ..." she said. "I feel us drifting apart. Not your fault. Mine, I guess or ..."

She held Miranda.

"I just ..." she gasped. "I see you with her, and you're so \_happy, \_and ..."

"Sweetie," I interrupted, "I'm happy with \_you.\_ Really. I love you, and ..."

"No," she said. "No, you're not. Or you never show it. You're always so serious and careful and ... deliberate with me. But when I see you with Mir, you're like ... Rose, you were \_giggling!\_"

She paused. "You've never giggled with me. Ever."

"And ..." she said. "She's a baby, and she needs me, and she needs her diaper changed and ... but ..."

Then she sighed.

"But I can't do anything. I can't even \_think,\_ because she's so needy, and this is so exhausting all the time, and sometimes ..."

She sniffled. "Sometimes I hate her."

She gasped that last one out very, very quickly and quietly.

She held her.

"Sometimes I hate her that you can love her and laugh with her, and I can't do anything, but just be a mom, ... I can't even be me, anymore. I can't even want to want you, because I have to drop everything as soon as she starts crying, and I'm too tired anyway to be any good for you, you know?" she said.

I drew in a breath to answer her.

But she pressed forward. "And I'm just waiting for the day when you don't even look at me. That you don't even care anymore, you just say: 'It's over.' And that's that. And you'll take Mir from me, because she's a 'good, good little girl,' and you'll do what with me? I don't know. Nothing. Just leave me and go someplace else, and I'll die the next day when my body quits on me. And that'll be that. And there's nothing I can do to stop it, 'cause all I can do is just look over the baby, and not have anything left for you, and ..."

"Lizzie, Lizzie!" I said sharply. "Stop this! Stop this right ..."

She didn't stop. She gasped out, right over my command: "And you'll just be like ..."

And that's when she broke, sobbing softly, her body convulsing, as she rocked in place, rocking her baby in her sorrow as she held her gently and tightly.

I held her. I held my baby, holding our baby.

"Baby," I said softly. "I love you. I love Miranda, and I love you. God, I love you so much. And, I guess," I said hesitantly, "I'm so serious around you, because I've lost you before, and I can't make a mistake and lose you again."

Lizzie sniffled sadly, coughing two times.

"I was silly with Miranda," I said, "because I was trying to get her to like me. She doesn't even like me, and I want that to change. I don't know how to be a mother like you are, Lizzie. I can't give her what you give her ..."

"You make her laugh," Lizzie said seriously, "and you laugh with her."

"Yes," I said.

"You never laugh with me," she accused.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"See?" she snapped, "Just like that. You're always just like that with me, and I'm afraid that one day you'll just ..."

"Lizzie," I sighed.

Lizzie was quiet for a while, then pouted angrily: "What?"

"I will love you until the day you die," I said solemnly, "and then, unto Eternity, because when you die, I will die with you. You are my heart, my one and only one, and when your heart stops beating, it stops for me, too. Forever."

I felt the words sink into her. I felt her thinking over them.

"What about Miranda?" she asked.

"What about her?"

"When you say you're gonna die with me," she asked, "do you mean it, like, really? Like you'll be dead?"

"Yes," I said. "Like the last five hundred years. Time will come. Time will go. It will not matter. You matter. Nothing else does. That's what it means when I say I love you. I loved you then. I love you now. I love you forever. Nothing else matters."

"But I thought you loved Miranda, too? Don't you love her enough to look after her when I'm gone?"

I chuckled slightly. "I thought you were jealous of my love for her a moment ago. Now you're demanding it? Which one is it, Lizzie?"

"Both," she said firmly. Then after a moment's thought, she added quickly. "I can choose both. I am a girl after all."

I smiled, pleased. "You are, indeed. A sweet, wonderful, loving, caring, sensitive ... \_sexy,\_ beautiful girl!"

\_"Jeez! Rosalie!" \_she exclaimed quietly, blushing.

"A wonderful mother, too," I added, pride tinging my voice.

"You are, too," she whispered seriously.

"No," I said, "not really. I change a diaper at night and let you get rest. Miranda knows who her mother is... who loves her."

"You love her," Lizzie averred.

"Yes," I sighed. "It's just that I see you gone, and I see me being me, afterwards, and just totally ruining her life by being too strong, and too demanding, and too distant, because I'm too afraid to hurt her ... like I hurt you."

"Because you love her, and she'll die?" Lizzie confirmed. "'Cause that's what happened to me?"

"Yes," I said, "I guess you have the right of it."

"Rosalie," Lizzie was serious now, "you have to try. I don't have all the answers. I'm not a good mother. I just try. You have to try. You have to keep trying after I'm gone. No zoning out on Miranda. She'll need you. She'll need you so bad after I'm gone, and I need you, too. I need to know she'll have a mother to love her after I'm gone. Promise me you'll look after when I'm dead."

I was quiet. I couldn't make that promise. With my heart dead? Nothing would matter.

"Promise me for me, Rosalie, please!" Lizzie pleaded.

"Yes, sweetie," I said finally, capitulating ... for her, "I promise."

"Promise me you'll do your best," she demanded.

I held her into me and kissed the back of her head.

"I promise," I said.

I felt the weight of the promise I made, pressing me down into the bed, a weight heavier than the world.

I was promising to be a mother to a human child. I was promising to do my best.

And I didn't know if my best would ever be good enough.

Lizzie sighed, however, relieved that I did promise this to her.

"Sweetie," I said, "it's three-fourteen in the morning. Get some sleep, okay?"

"Okay," she said weakly.

The day had taken its toll, and the night had, too, and she was already so, so weak and frail as it was.

"I love you, Rosalie Hale," she whispered.

"I love you, my Lizzie," I whispered back, "for ever and ever and ever."

She breathed two breaths.

"I will, too," she said, contemplating her own words, and I felt her marveling at them as she said them. "Even when I'm dead and gone, I'll love you, Rose. I'll love you forever. Do you know that? Can you feel it?"

"Yes," I said quietly.

I loved her. She died, but I got the sense that she loved me, too, maybe, without even realizing it, perhaps. And then she came back, and she loved me, again, and still. She loved me after all this time, and death did not even stop her from loving me.

I did feel it.

"I feel it, too," Lizzie said.

And then I felt her close her eyes, and sleep.

End  
file.